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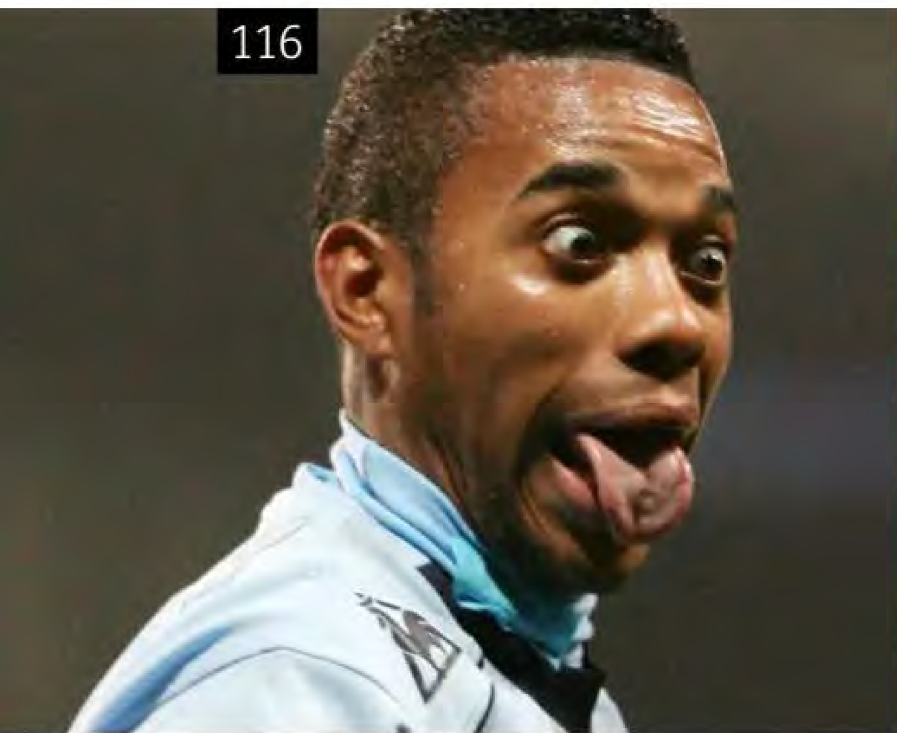

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The journey from Athens to Melbourne took 30 days by boat, and it changed Angelos Postecoglou's life.

Three years earlier, when Postecoglou was 20 months old, Greece had been turned upside down. Born in the Nea Filadelfeia suburb – home to AEK Athens, the team his father Dimitris supported – Ange was too young to understand what was going on when tanks appeared on the streets of the capital in 1967, weeks before planned elections. A right-wing military coup had taken place, and everything was about to change.

Under the new rule, Greece became a police state, protests were outlawed and businesses were nationalised, among them the Postecoglou family furniture-making firm. Fearing for the future, Dimitris and wife Voula made the decision to get out, for the sake of their children – joining an exodus to Australia, a migration route taken by 180,000 people in the years since the end of World War Two.

Such was his age, Postecoglou has no real first-hand memory of the month-long trip to the other side of the world, accompanied by his parents and his elder sister Liz. "Not really," he tells *FourFourTwo* now, thinking back to those formative years of his life. "We left Greece when I was five, and most of my memories are stories that were passed on, that kind of became images in my mind. My clear recollections of childhood begin when I started school at six or seven, but I've been told the story of our journey, the difficulties, and settling in Australia.

"Being young, I was shielded from all of it. My parents made the ultimate sacrifice. For all intents and purposes, we were refugees. We knew no one in Australia and my parents didn't know the language, but they chose to give the opportunity of a better life to their kids rather than themselves, because it was a tough life for my parents.



"That stays with you, that resonates with you, you take that along with you in your life. I understood that to make good the sacrifice that my parents made, I needed to live a life that they wanted me to live.

"Football was the one thing that glued the whole family together. My journey in football allowed us to navigate the difficulties of being immigrants in a new country. I don't know if that opportunity would have been afforded to me if we'd decided to stay in Greece or move somewhere else. I've always tried to honour the opportunity I was given by my parents."

During nearly four decades in the game as a player and coach, honour that opportunity he certainly has. Underestimated, overlooked, even blacklisted at one point, he's never had it easy. Finally though, he's getting serious recognition on the biggest stage – first with Celtic and now at Tottenham Hotspur in the Premier League. It's taken 27 long years of serious hard work in management to make Ange Postecoglou an overnight success.

Above Steering South Melbourne to back-to-back titles in 1998-99 **Below** His early success secured Ange a role with the Australian FA



"I WAS PUSKAS' CHAUFFEUR"

Postecoglou is the epitome of calm when he meets *FFT* inside the media auditorium at Tottenham's plush training ground in Enfield – a training complex whose top-of-the-range facilities even include a putting green, which must have been in use 24/7 while Gareth Bale was back at the club.

Once a week, this auditorium is packed with journalists for Postecoglou's pre-match press briefing, but today we've been granted an exclusive meeting with the 58-year-old, two days after the club's dramatic comeback win over Sheffield United which continued Spurs' fine start to life under their new boss.

Refreshingly, the man known as 'Big Ange' has actually arrived early for our rendezvous. He's immediately friendly, if understated as he serenely poses for photos – he's previously admitted that he doesn't always feel at ease making small talk with new acquaintances, something that plenty of people will be able to identify with.

As soon as we start talking about football, however, he's evidently more comfortable – speaking softly but thoughtfully on his love for the game, which began sat in front of the television alongside his dad. Known as Jim rather than Dimitris in Australia, his father worked long hours to provide for the family, so their time watching football together was when they truly bonded. Fittingly, it was always English football.

"Growing up in Australia, there was usually a programme on a Monday night – I think Brian Moore reviewed the matches from the weekend," reflects Postecoglou. "Football wasn't the predominant sport in Australia so they put it on late at night, at something like 10pm. Even though it was a weeknight, my dad would let me stay up and we'd watch it together religiously. My earliest memories of football came from watching games in the English First Division."

Unsurprisingly, given the era he grew up in, he was most inspired by Liverpool's passing masterclasses. "In the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s, Liverpool were a fantastic team – they were my team," he continues. "I liked watching them – not just all the success they had, but the manner in which they played. It was very possession-based, very attacking – I loved that."

Postecoglou took that attacking approach into his playing career – the 5ft 10in defender was a left-back who preferred getting forward to actually defending, and won four caps for Australia, even if he's quick to play down his on-pitch aptitude. "Oh mate, I was alright," says the man who made South Melbourne's team of the century, voted for by supporters and an expert panel. "I tried hard, but I was fairly limited in terms of my abilities in many respects. I knew that, but it didn't stop me trying to maximise what I could get out of it.

"I saw my playing career as a precursor for what I was really passionate about, which



Above Stepping up to become the head honcho of South Melbourne

was coaching. I was curious about the other side of the game, even while I was playing. I was in a leadership role from a young age and connected very closely to my coaches."

Postecoglou spent all of his playing days at South Melbourne, formerly founded by Greek migrants as South Melbourne Hellas. He was named captain at 22 and won two Australian domestic titles, one of them under the legendary Ferenc Puskas, who surprisingly arrived in 1989. It would be the Hungarian icon's final job in club management, after he'd guided Panathinaikos to the European Cup final at Wembley.

"It was just the bizarre world of football that, in a backwater of the game, we literally got one of the greatest footballers of all time on our doorstep," recalls Postecoglou now. "I had great times with him. He struggled to speak any English but had worked in Greece. I was captain, and with my Greek background I ended up being both his interpreter and his chauffeur. I tried to squeeze in as much time with him as possible.

"He just had a brilliant outlook on life, more importantly than just football. He was a very humble man, and because of that he had the respect of everyone. That was a good lesson for me and for all of us – if you achieve great things but stay humble, people will respond to you more than if you start talking about your personal achievements. He never did that, and as a coach he wanted his teams to score goals – that's all he was interested in. If we won 5-4, he was happier than if we'd won 1-0. I loved the time I had with him.

"We tried to keep in contact afterwards, but by the time I became a manager myself his health had deteriorated, which was such a shame. I think he took huge pride in us. We came really late in his journey as a manager, but I think he enjoyed working with a young group of guys who worshipped him. I was the leader of that pack, and I'm sure he'd have taken pride in seeing me develop as a coach."

Many years down the line, that grounding would allow Postecoglou to bring Puskas-esque attacking football back to two cities where the Hungarian had his most famous moments – Glasgow, where he scored four times as Real Madrid pummelled Eintracht Frankfurt 7-3 in the 1960 European Cup Final, and London, where he'd masterminded the Magical Magyars' 6-3 demolition of England in 1953, dubbed the 'Match of the Century'.

"MY EARLIEST MEMORIES OF FOOTBALL ARE STAYING UP WITH DAD WATCHING FIRST DIVISION MATCHES"

Postecoglou's own managerial career got underway in his early 30s – a knee injury had forced him to retire at 27, before he stepped up from assistant to take South Melbourne's top job in 1996. Quickly, he was a success – in 1998, he led the club to their first National Soccer League title in seven years, then they repeated the feat a season later.

"I felt really comfortable in that role from the moment I got the opportunity to coach," he admits. "I'd just turned 31 when I took over – I was coaching guys I'd played with or were older than me, but I found it a natural fit for me. It's almost like I'd been preparing my whole life for that job.

"I knew the club's values and I knew that if I wanted to have a career as a coach, my first gig was going to be extremely important. I threw myself into it and didn't worry about my lack of experience – I tackled it the way I'd always wanted to."

In 1999, he also guided South Melbourne to Oceania Club Championship glory. It earned them a place in the first ever FIFA Club World Cup in Brazil, where they were drawn in the same group as a Vasco da Gama outfit that included Romario and Edmundo, plus English Treble winners Manchester United.

"It was a crazy period for us," remembers Postecoglou. "We were semi-pro at the time in Australia and Manchester United had pulled out of the FA Cup – the only time a club had ever pulled out of the FA Cup – to play in this inaugural Club World Cup. Ahead of the draw, we were hoping for a couple of things – to get Manchester United and to play at the Maracana. We ticked both boxes. Although it was only for a couple of weeks, to share that same rarefied air of professional football was an amazing experience for all of us."

His work at South Melbourne secured him a job within the Australian FA, taking charge of their youth sides. He stayed in the role until early 2007. "That seven years was kind of my PhD in coaching," he explains. "I'd done four ▸

LEADING THE WAY

Ange Postecoglou is the Premier League's first Australian boss – these three were also pioneers



OSSIE ARDILES

Thirty years ago, Spurs also hired the Premier League's first ever South American boss, though Argentine Ardiles lasted little more than a year in the White Hart Lane dugout. It would be over a decade until the next South American arrival, when Luiz Felipe Scolari briefly coached Chelsea.



RUUD GULLIT

Ardiles excluded, every Premier League gaffer hailed from the British Isles until Chelsea gave Gullit the nod in 1996. The Dutch legend had spent the previous year as a player at Stamford Bridge – after stepping up as player-boss, he led the Blues to FA Cup glory in his first season.



DAVID WAGNER

The former USA striker became the Premier League's maiden North American boss when he took the Huddersfield job in 2015, even if he'd spent his entire life in Germany. Bob Bradley joined Swansea a year later, then Jesse Marsch moved to Leeds in 2022 after leaving RB Leipzig.

years as a senior coach, then when I got the youth team job, I was lucky that we qualified for six youth World Cups and it allowed me to travel the world. I ensured that everywhere I went, I was a sponge. I used it as my way to come up with my own football manifesto – my own theories and philosophies – just by experiencing so many different cultures and football environments. I gathered up as much knowledge as I could to help me with what I wanted to do next."

FROZEN OUT

As it turned out, Postecoglou's options for his next job proved far more limited than he had originally hoped – and all because of one television interview that went horribly wrong.

After the under-17s and under-20s had enjoyed a lengthy run of reaching successive World Cups, both suddenly came to an end in 2006 – the U20s lost in qualifying to South Korea, while the U17s suffered a surprising elimination at the hands of Laos. The south east Asian country were later disqualified for fielding overage players at a separate event, but the Joeys were not reinstated.

Appearing on SBS, Postecoglou was taken aback by the nature of a live grilling by former Crystal Palace, Portsmouth, and Socceroos star Craig Foster, delivered in a manner that's difficult to imagine England's youth coaches ever having to endure. Taking umbrage at suggestions he should resign, the 13-minute conversation descended into an argument. "I'll welcome any scrutiny, provided it's informed," responded Postecoglou. "I'm not going to sit here and take it from people who weren't even there, telling me I can't coach."

Soon, it was announced that his contract wouldn't be renewed. "I didn't enjoy the experience, and I don't think it was helpful to anyone," he tells *FFT* now of that infamous interview – he has met Foster since, and the pair have buried the hatchet. "But if you stay in the game for a long time, every manager is going to have moments where you're under the microscope and scrutinised. It happens on a weekly basis.

"I didn't think much of it at the time, but it had an impact on my career in the short term – I know it did, because there were a couple of jobs I went for after, where the feedback was I just wasn't going to be a popular pick. That's followed me through my whole career – I haven't been the popular pick wherever I've gone and that builds a resilience in you.

"I don't take it personally. I think, 'People are going to see in me whatever they want, that's fine, but somebody will see things in me eventually'. I was always confident that given the opportunity, whenever that would happen along my career, I'd repay the faith that people showed in me by selecting me."

After the SBS interview, Postecoglou would have to wait two-and-a-half years to manage again at the top level in Australia. They were difficult days, but days he used as fuel. "You realise that with time, if you're determined, you can overcome any obstacle you face and it makes you stronger," he insists. "Going forward, I had less insecurity about myself and my position. I thought, 'You know what? I'm just going to keep doing things the way I believe they should be done, and whatever the fallout is, I'll survive and move on'."

During the interim, his desire to continue in management led him back to the country of his birth, handed the manager's job at Panachaiki in the Greek city of Patras, even if he had to drop down to the third tier to do it. "I couldn't get another chance in Australia, but this opportunity came up in Greece and I loved it," he says of his nine-month spell there. "It was chaotic, and although it was the third division, it was a big club – they'd been in the first division and the city of Patras is the third biggest in Greece, they absolutely adore their football.

"Every week was chaos, pandemonium, the breadth of the emotions were extreme – you win and you're a hero, you lose and you stay indoors for a bit. But I loved being in that environment, it's what I missed in Australia. As much as I enjoyed my coaching journey there, we lacked that passion. We had a very successful time at Panachaiki – that job gave me real confidence that my methods could work in a country where football is the be all and end all."

When Postecoglou returned to Australia, job offers still weren't exactly falling at his feet – he took charge of Whittlesea Zebras, rock bottom of the Victoria Premier League and beset with problems, but was unable to save them from relegation, winning only two of 16 matches.

Finally though, Ange got the break he was waiting for, and the chance to reignite his career. All he needed was one club to show some faith in him, and he never looked back. That club was Brisbane Roar, who'd endured a poor start to the 2009-10 A-League season. In came Postecoglou, and within 18 months he'd turned them into champions, bagging a second successive Grand Final triumph a year later. In the middle of it all, they went 36 matches unbeaten, an Australian record.

That job was a pivotal moment in Ange's career. "Yeah it was," he says. "I knew with my first job in coaching that if I was going to have a career, I had to be successful, and this was kind of my second coming in terms of relaunching my coaching career. I felt really good about the opportunity because after my four years at South Melbourne, then seven years of gaining as much knowledge as I could from around the world as youth team boss, whatever my next job was going to be, I was in no doubt I'd make an impact.

"It was important I did that, and it wasn't just the success – more importantly it was the football we played. That resonated and made an impact in Australian football. They still talk about that team – we broke some records, but it was the manner in which we did it that probably had the biggest impact."

A VITAL PEP TALK

After a brief spell at the helm of Melbourne Victory, Postecoglou was picked to become Australia's new boss in October 2013 – the Socceroos had already qualified for the 2014 World Cup, but consecutive 6-0 friendly losses against Brazil and France had spelt the end for German coach Holger Osieck.

Being drawn in the Group of Death with the Netherlands, Chile and holders Spain made it virtually impossible for them to reach the knockout stages in Brazil, but Postecoglou did guide Australia to their first and only Asian Cup triumph in 2015. "As much as I preferred club football, to manage your own nation at a World Cup, it was too good an opportunity to pass up," he confesses. "I had a wonderful four years – the World Cup was an amazing experience and a precursor to us winning the

ANGE'S CLUB HONOURS

SOUTH MELBOURNE
National Soccer League Championship
1998, 1999
Oceania Club Championship
1999

BRISBANE ROAR
A-League Championship
2011, 2012

YOKOHAMA F MARINOS
J League
2019

CELTIC
Scottish Premiership
2022, 2023
Scottish Cup
2023
Scottish League Cup
2022, 2023



Top Roar reaped the rewards from giving Postecoglou a break **Above** He managed Melbourne Victory for 18 months, but the chance to coach the Socceroos at the World Cup was too good to turn down

"THAT BRISBANE TEAM IS STILL TALKED ABOUT NOW. THE MANNER IN WHICH WE PLAYED HAD A BIG IMPACT"

Asian Cup. Then we had a real tough World Cup qualifying campaign for 2018, but I was proud that we qualified for Russia as well."

Perhaps surprisingly, Postecoglou opted to step down immediately after qualification. The Socceroos had received criticism having needed extra time to finally overcome Syria in a play-off, and the manager later revealed that he and the federation weren't entirely aligned on issues behind the scenes – he had been pushing to instil a long-term vision and methodology, knowing that legends like Tim Cahill were preparing to retire, and new blood would need to be introduced.

"It wasn't that difficult a decision," he says now of his resignation. "From the outside, people probably saw it as a bit curious – why you would go when you've done all the hard work to get to the World Cup? But every time I've moved on in my career, particularly after the youth job I had, I wanted to make sure I didn't stay too long in a role where I didn't feel the challenges were there for me. We'd won the Asian Cup and we'd qualified for the World Cup. I thought there was a natural end to that cycle and I was keen to find another challenge outside Australia. I didn't want to leave before we'd qualified, so we got the job done, then the decision was made."



Above "We play the Netherlands and Spain after this? Oh great..."

Within two months, he was appointed as the new manager of J League club Yokohama F Marinos, part of the City Football Group alongside the likes of Melbourne City. "When I left the Australian team I wasn't really sure what the next step would be, but we'd kind of made the choice as a family that we'd move abroad and it was likely we'd go to Asia," says Postecoglou, who met his wife Georgia, also Greek-born, during her days as the marketing manager at South Melbourne. They have two young boys, Max and Alexi, and an older son, James, who's spent time living in Greece and done military service there.

"We had different options – China, Japan, the UAE," continues Postecoglou. "Yokohama has the link with the City Group and I knew Brian Marwood well – he said, 'Have a chat with them, it could be a good project for you'. As soon as I spoke to them, I just knew it was the perfect place for me. It's a massive club that hadn't had much success for 15 years, and they wanted to transform the way they played their football.

"I loved every minute of it there. I loved the country, I loved the league, I loved the club, and it tested me because one of my biggest tools to create the team I want is language, and that's snatched away from you straight away. I had to change my messaging and become really clear in the way I passed on information using an interpreter. If you talk for 15 minutes, that means half an hour of talking. We also needed multiple translators in the room because we had Brazilian players and a Thai player, so it forced me to fine-tune my messaging. For me to get ideas across clearly, they had to be concise, and people responded. To win a championship for the club, after 15 years without one, was terrific."

Again, Postecoglou bagged the league title encouraging an expansive style of play that gained admirers, showing why the club had ▸



"THE BIGGEST MOTIVATION WAS TAKING OVER A CLUB THAT HASN'T HAD SUCCESS. I LOVE THOSE CHALLENGES"





fought so hard to keep him when he became a candidate to take over the Greek national team early in his reign. Midway through the club's title-winning campaign, Postecoglou's charges also impressed in a summer friendly against Manchester City – although they lost 3-1, the Japanese side recorded 58 per cent possession, something that very few outfits manage against Pep Guardiola's juggernaut. "They came over and it was fantastic for us," beams Postecoglou. "Against the best in the world, we wanted to play the creative football that we played on a weekly basis."

That performance may have proved more significant than Ange realised at the time. Pep has since spoken about being impressed when he met Postecoglou in Japan, calling him 'an exceptional manager'. Reports have even suggested that the Catalan mentioned Postecoglou to Celtic majority shareholder Dermot Desmond, during a chance meeting at a hotel while the Bhoys were searching for a new manager in 2021.

Asked whether that tale was true, and that Guardiola did indeed recommend him for the Parkhead job, Postecoglou says, "I'm not sure. You know what it's like – success has a million fathers, so who knows what the actual story was. But it was Desmond who reached out to me. I chatted to him and literally straight after that conversation, he made his decision. What other background work they did, I'm not really sure, but I was delighted he saw something in me to give me the opportunity."

JUMPERS AND SUBBUTEO

Eddie Howe had been on the verge of taking the Celtic job that summer, only to back out because of issues assembling the backroom staff he wanted. The reaction to Postecoglou's appointment was lukewarm among Bhoys fans, sceptical of a guy who few had heard of.

Above Ange was a title winner in Yokohama before helping Celtic to reclaim top spot **Below** Pep poses with the boss he calls 'exceptional'

"This has to be a wind-up," said ex-Scotland striker Alan Brazil, a lifelong Celtic supporter. "Where do they come up with these people?"

But Postecoglou has been underestimated time and time again in his managerial career – his appointment at Tottenham was greeted with scepticism, too. Another former J League boss called Arsene Wenger experienced the same when he pitched up in north London in 1996, and Spurs' new manager has long since learned not to let such things bother him.

"You can use it in your power – if people underestimate you, you have an advantage," he explains. "With my background, it's not your traditional footballing story, so there's always that doubt. Whenever I've moved it's kind of been to a different level, and there's always been the question of 'Well, can you do it at the next level?' But I've never worried about that. I've always felt that as I've gone up a level, I'm working with better conditions, better footballers, and I don't think my ideas would suffer in that environment. If anything, I thought I would thrive."

The Australian did just that at Celtic Park. The previous season, the club had let go of the league title for the first time in 10 years under Neil Lennon, finishing 25 points behind Rangers, with chief executive Peter Lawwell's car torched by an angry fan.

Swiftly making moves to improve matters, Postecoglou transformed the team's style of play, also utilising his knowledge of Japanese football to bring in Kyogo Furuhashi, later followed by Reo Hatate and Daizen Maeda. Despite some early defeats, the Bhoys beat both Dundee and St Mirren 6-0 before August was out, and supporters were soon convinced that the new gaffer was taking them in the right direction. After a reverse at Livingston in mid-September, they didn't lose another league match for the rest of the campaign, spanning 32 matches, regaining the title and also lifting the Scottish League Cup.

"Going into Celtic wasn't easy – knowing their history and knowing that Rangers had just won the league," he says. "Celtic didn't win anything that year, not even a cup, and there aren't many years in their history where that's happened. You know you're going to have to turn things around quickly, but I never felt the pressure from the people at the club. They really wanted to get back to playing the football that the fans wanted, and obviously have success, but they knew it was going to take time as the team needed regenerating. ▸



"AS FANS, ANGE MAKES US FEEL SPECIAL"

Chris Miller of the *Extra Inch* podcast on why Postecoglou has captured so many hearts in north London already

There was a moment at the end of Spurs' fan forum last month, just as presenter Nihal Arthanayake went to wrap up, when Ange Postecoglou insisted on taking a question from a young fan with Down's Syndrome.

"Yeah, he's got the best question," said Postecoglou, with enthusiasm, with certainty. As that lad listened to the Australian's reply, proudly hugging the people he'd attended the forum with, he felt special. That's how I think we all feel right now. Postecoglou has made us all feel really, really special.

When Richarlison spoke out about requiring therapy, his boss responded by discussing mental health and the fact that players don't have the perfect lives they're often painted as having. He approaches everything with humanity first, and that's so refreshing.

But he's also a brilliant tactical mind, a top coach and incredible motivator. The transformation of Tottenham from a team playing an overly prescribed and predictable style to a fluid, fluent, pass and move – complete with a high press, constant triangles and inverted full-backs – has been remarkable.

It has been best summarised by the performances of Yves Bissouma, who looked lost under Antonio Conte. When told where to move, where to pass and – equally importantly – what not to do, he was overthinking things. Under Ange, he still has a job to do, but now he has freedom to do it his way. He sits at the base of the midfield and receives from the defence, beats the press and moves it on, but he's also seen slaloming into the opposition penalty box. Postecoglou enabled that evolution.

Goals are being shared around the squad, new leaders are emerging and the spirit is infectious. It genuinely feels like we, fans and players, have been reawakened. Under Ange Postecoglou, long may it continue.

"On the other hand, I didn't want the club to go through another year without winning something. We had a slowish start, we lost three out of our first six games, then we were almost perfect after that. It was just brilliant that after a really tough season, you could tell the supporters suddenly had their club back to where they wanted it to be. It was a great group of lads and over the two years there, I thought we played superb football. Again, it was the manner in which we did it that made the biggest impact."

Last term, Celtic sealed the treble, winning 31 of their 34 league matches by the time the title was confirmed, also claiming a club record 9-0 away victory at Dundee United. Smashing 114 league goals, the Bhoys' best tally since 1937-38, the club's achievements earned Postecoglou a spot on FIFA's five-man shortlist for this year's coach of the year prize, alongside Guardiola, Xavi, Luciano Spalletti and Simone Inzaghi.

Little wonder that all the fans adored him. 'Ange Ball' became so popular at Parkhead that even the black jumper he sported on the touchline became iconic, with Subbuteo figures of a sweater-wearing Postecoglou available to buy online. That love from the supporters meant a lot to him, and still does.

"It means everything, because even in the tough beginning, the fans were the ones who stuck by us, and by me personally," he says. "The only way you can repay that is to give them a side that excites them and gives them great memories, an experience that will stay with them forever. It was an unbelievable two years for me. I loved being manager of that football club."

"THEY KNEW WHAT I DO"

By the time Celtic beat Inverness to win the Scottish Cup and clinch the treble on June 3, there was a sense that it may be his final game at the club. Nothing had been signed, but Spurs' interest had become widely known, after a search for a permanent replacement for Antonio Conte had also seen them linked with Julian Nagelsmann, Xabi Alonso, Arne Slot and Luis Enrique.

A second spell for Mauricio Pochettino was never seriously considered by Daniel Levy, though reports suggested the chairman was looking for a return to the type of coach he appointed when he hired the Argentine back in 2014 – a manager whose reputation was on the ascendancy, with an attacking style and ability to develop rising stars. Postecoglou ticked every box.

"I go into these things with the presumption that they've already done their research on me and know exactly what they're getting," Postecoglou says of the discussions he had with Levy, before he was unveiled as Spurs' new boss. "Before I even talk about anything, I think, 'Well, this is a club that wants to play a certain way, because that's what I do'. I'll assume that by talking to me, they're aware of what I'll bring – if they had a different picture in their mind, they probably wouldn't have spoken to me. There's no reason for me to talk about my football philosophy or what I do, as there's 26 or 27 years of evidence of precisely what I do.

"It was more about Daniel understanding what my motivations were for taking on the role, and the biggest motivation for me was taking over a big club that hasn't had success. They're just the kind of challenges that I love, and it's pretty regular in my story – taking over a club that has had a disappointing year and is craving success. That's what I've tried to seek throughout my whole career. When I was at South Melbourne they hadn't won the league for seven years, at Brisbane they'd never won one, Yokohama 15 years, Celtic a year – and a year at Celtic feels more like 15 years anywhere else.

"When you look at Spurs, they're a massive club, one of the world's biggest if you look at the fantastic facilities and everything. It's in the Premier League and I can see that people say, 'Well you're just jumping'. But the thing that really appealed to me was that the club hasn't had success for a long time – I want to make an impact here as I did at other clubs.

"THE PRIORITY IS TO PLAY THE GAME A CERTAIN WAY THAT EXCITES SUPPORTERS, THEN SUCCESS FOLLOWS"



Below Tottenham took the game to Arsenal in the first derby under Ange

"Because in the end, when I do decide to give it all away and retire on a Greek island somewhere, I want to know that the stuff I've done in my career, the sacrifices that my family has made, are meaningfully packaged into wonderful memories that I can always reflect upon, and I'll hopefully be welcomed back at those clubs."

When he speaks in such terms, it's easy to see why fans fall in love with him wherever he goes. Postecoglou gets it – he understands the things that really matter to supporters and communicates it so eloquently, in a way that some of his predecessors never could, if they understood it in the first place.

His words in the press have drawn universal praise since his Spurs arrival – 17 years after a media interview threatened to destroy him, he's now experienced enough to know how to use the press to bring people together. "It's an important part of the game now," he says. "When I do speak to the media, I'm not really speaking to the media, I'm speaking to our fans, because that's the only chance they get every week to hear from me.

"It's not like they've got direct access to me where they can call me up and ask how I'm doing. The press conferences, the interviews I do, they get comfort from knowing that 'OK, the guy leading our football club is giving us an outlook on what's happening'."

Ange is fully aware that the one thing Spurs supporters crave most is a first trophy since the 2008 League Cup, but knows that getting there requires a holistic approach, not fixating solely on silverware. "The number one target is firstly just to get the team to play football that excites the supporters, that's my aim," he says. "But ultimately, every club I've been at for any length of time has had success, and success means winning things. That's the end game, for sure, but the priority is to play the game a certain way, then success follows."



Above 'Ange Ball' is well and truly up and running in north London



THE GREAT LILYWHITE HOPE

From day one, despite the imminent exit of star man Harry Kane, fans spotted signs that Postecoglou's football could be a whole lot more exciting than the football they watched under Antonio Conte, Jose Mourinho and Nuno Espirito Santo. Even during pre-season friendlies, supporters marvelled at passing moves that went from one end of the field to the other, the sort of thing they'd rarely seen in years gone by.

When Tottenham faced Brentford in their opening Premier League match, supporters were already chanting their new manager's name – even if Postecoglou modestly said he hadn't earned their love yet. "I want to bring the fans something tangible – that's success and a team they're excited about, but don't get me wrong, I do appreciate their support," he stresses now. "It helps me to accelerate the things I want to achieve here, because if you've got the fan support, invariably you get support within the club as well, so all those things I don't take for granted. Ultimately for me though, the reward will come when I give something back to the football club – that's still to come."

Early victories against Manchester United, Bournemouth and Burnley earned him the Premier League manager of the month gong for August, and what he's already delivered is hope, a single word so important in life that Barack Obama once successfully harnessed it to become US president.

"Hope is important, very important," says Postecoglou. "I think most football supporters understand that success doesn't just happen overnight, but if they see something that's taking them along that road and gives them hope every week, they'll ride the bumps with you. They'll understand that there are going to be some obstacles along the way, but it's when there isn't hope and obstacles come that you find that fanbases get disenchanted. It's about giving them hope and that can come in a number of ways – the way we play, the results, the players we bring in. All of those things have helped in this period."

Postecoglou has followed up hope with success at several clubs during his career – it's why he became the first Australian ever to manage in the Premier League this summer. "I'm proud to be the first, because I haven't got here for any other reason than the work I've done," he says. "It's not just Australian coaches who hadn't managed here, it's Asian coaches too – even a coach from outside of Europe and the Americas is quite unusual."

No coach from either the Asian or African confederations had ever taken charge of a Premier League team before. That Ange became the first is evidence of just what he has achieved with his life – a life given to him by his parents' decision to leave Greece for Australia more than half a century ago.

In 2018, a year before J League glory with Yokohama F Marinos, Postecoglou's father passed away. Jim never got to see his son move back to Europe and win hearts at Celtic and Spurs, but he would surely be immensely proud. "Yeah, I'm sure he would be," replies Postecoglou, the tone of his voice making it clear how much his father meant to him. "He was a man of his generation where they didn't talk about their feelings too much, but he probably saw this in me one day. He certainly talked about it often enough – he spoke about it when very few people saw anything in me, but he did.

"I'm gutted he's not here for the journey, but I've got no doubt that he's looking down from somewhere and taking huge pride. Even though he's not around, him and my mum made the ultimate sacrifice. I want to make sure I honour that until I can no longer do it."

There can be no greater, more meaningful motivation. The Spurs boss may not vividly recall the boat trip he made to the other side of the world aged five, but he hasn't forgotten those origins. Angelos Postecoglou arrived in Australia as an outsider, but turned himself into a huge success story, just as he'd later do in Japan and Scotland. Now, in England, he's determined to do it again.

TACTICS

"A FOOTBALL MATCH IS LIKE AN EXAM – YOU PREPARE, BUT YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THE QUESTIONS ARE GOING TO BE"

FFT's tactical expert **Adam Clery** sits down with the Spurs gaffer to discuss the theory behind 'Ange Ball', Greek philosophy and all

Not a week goes by without analysis of 'Ange Ball' as a concept. Is it something that exists to you, or just something that people say?
I think it's there, definitely. I'd like to think there's something there that we work on every week, and it's not just random events. But at the same time, what I love about football is it has its own life. I often say to the players that what we do during the week and the information we give them is kind of preparing them for an exam. But like all exams, you don't know what the questions are going to be, you know? A game of football throws up things, but yeah, there's a structure. We try to allow players to then find solutions within that, but there are some disciplines we need to have as a group, for the individuals to function within it.

What are the personality traits you look for in players?
I mean first, I don't see them as players – they're people. Particularly when you get to this level, there are so many wonderfully talented players around the world. People talk about recruiting, but it's pretty hard to get it wrong as they're all so good. It's more about the fit. Do they fit into the football we want to play? Are they the right kind of personality? That's a big one for me – with the way we play, you need to have a certain mindset as an individual, to be brave and to want to challenge yourself on a daily basis. That's why, before we sign anyone, I always have a little bit of a chat to the player, just to get a feel for the kind of person they are. Not to pass any sort of judgement on them, but to see if they really understand, and what's their motivation for coming to us.

You were a left-back during your playing career. How would you have found playing in a team managed by Ange Postecoglou?
I would have enjoyed the training, because I hated running, mate! That's not great for a footballer. I was a decent runner, I was in decent shape, but I could never understand why we used to run at training without the ball. We'd run for kilometres and kilometres, and I absolutely hated it. So I've taken that into my coaching philosophy – everything we do in training has got to be around the way we want to play our football. So I would have enjoyed training, but it's fair to say that as an inverted full-back, I'd have been lacking a fair bit of the qualities needed.

To flip it on its head, how would you have coached Ange Postecoglou the player?
You see the way we play. It's high energy, high tempo. We want to press, which means you've got to be fit. We work hard at training, but all of it is with the motivation of playing our football. I come from an era where we didn't question those things. If someone said, 'Training today is a 10k run', we'd go and run. Some of my coaches would have loved seeing all these woods and fields, just telling us to run until they couldn't see us any more. My management style is to give the players a reason to do what I want them to do.

There's a Greek term 'Kato i bala' that you've previously said informs a lot of your footballing philosophy. Could you tell us more about that?
It's what my dad used to tell me all the time, and it means 'keep the ball on the deck'. That was his philosophy around football – that if the ball is on the grass, that's when the magic happens. So why have you got to kick it long and into the air? Football's been the conduit to everything meaningful in my life. All of my relationships have stemmed from the game. My career is entwined with the game, and I use it as a metaphor for life. We train every day as if we feel lucky to be doing what we're doing, and I treat life the same way. I don't take it for granted. I want to achieve things that haven't been done before in my professional life, and I want to take that into my personal life and try to live every day to its fullest. There's a synergy there and that helps, because when I talk to a group of players, wherever I've been, I think the one thing they come away with is that I mean what I say. It's me, it's genuine. I'm not saying it to get a reaction or because I'd heard

"THE FOCUS AT THE START OF A NEW JOB IS GETTING PEOPLE TO BELIEVE IN ME, THEN THE REST WILL COME"

somebody else say it. When I speak to them, they know it's really me saying those words.

Do you feel like you're in the right place to achieve the things you want to achieve?
I think I've done it my whole career, mate. I've never felt the need to sort of validate it, because I hadn't done it at a certain level. I can comfortably say that I'd be welcomed back at all of my former clubs, as I've made an impact. This is another opportunity to do that, at one of the biggest clubs in the world in the major competition in the world, and I get there's more emphasis around it. But everywhere I've been I've tried to leave my mark. So far, wherever I've been, I've done it.

Has settling into this job been different to previous ones, or have you done largely the same things?
Each of my clubs has been different, but the way I go about it is pretty much the same – as quickly as possible, try to gain the trust of all the people involved. Players, staff, fans, everyone involved in the club, how fast can I get them to believe in me? That's where it kind of begins and ends, because you can have all the knowledge in the world, but if people don't really resonate or believe in you, it's a lost cause. Everywhere I've gone, that's always been my major priority. The focus at the beginning is getting people to believe in me, then the rest will come.

How have you found that challenge of getting this Spurs side to believe in you?
There's been a consistent pattern, in that I've always gone into clubs after some pretty disappointing times. So it's about trying to lift whatever dark cloud may be over the place. It's been no different here, but the players have been outstanding. Everyone at the club has been great – just at least having an open mind to listen, that's all you can ask for. You can't expect people to follow you from the first day, but if they're willing to listen, you've got a starting point for what you want to do.

How far do you think this group can go?
You know what, why would I bother putting a limit on it? When I started 26 or 27 years ago, if somebody said to you, 'This bloke's going to end up managing one of the biggest clubs in the world, after managing one of the most famous clubs in the world in Celtic, and he's going to have all this success', you could have said, 'That ain't gonna happen – that's a Hollywood script'. So I've learned not to put a limit on where I'm going to end up, and I'm not going to put a limit on what this football club can do.

WATCH THE INTERVIEW

You can watch Adam's interview with Ange Postecoglou in full on FFT's YouTube channel. To see that and more of his tactical analysis, simply search for 'FourFourTwo' on YouTube



Released by Notts County before a spell with semi-pro Dunkirk, Wes Morgan rose to become captain of the Leicester City side that shocked the world. In his own words, he tells *FFT* how his dreams came true

Interview Sean Cole



“I WAS PLAYING IN NON-LEAGUE AS A TEENAGER – WHEN I LIFTED THE PREMIER LEAGUE TROPHY, I HAD NO RIGHT TO BE IN THAT POSITION”

Saturday, May 7, 2016 was one of the most important days of my life. You might remember it. Against all the odds, I'd captained my team to the Premier League title. As I stepped forward to lift the trophy and celebrate the greatest success in Leicester City's history, I was the happiest man in the world. It was a miracle for me and the club. No one would ever have predicted it. Even now, I have to pinch myself. Seven years on, it still feels like a dream. I'm not sure that will ever change.

Leicester felt like the centre of the football universe that day. Travelling in and seeing all the fans, it was pandemonium. Everyone had come out early to make the most of such a special occasion. I was pulled from pillar to post, being talked through timings and how the whole day was mapped out. It was difficult to concentrate on the game with everything else going on, but we got the job done, beating Everton 3-1.

It was like a fairytale. Leicester had looked destined for relegation the previous season. Now, we were champions of England. The 5000-1 outsiders who shocked everyone, including ourselves. There was so much to take in – we were trying to make sense of such an incredible achievement. That's why, if you watch the presentation ceremony, you can see me close my eyes for a split second just before I collect the trophy. I needed to savour that moment and what it meant to me. To truly understand how I felt that day, you have to know where I came from and what it took to get there.

Considering where my career began, I had no right to be in that position. I was a normal lad from The Meadows, a Nottingham estate known for drugs and crime, following in the footsteps of Tony Adams, Roy Keane, Patrick Vieira, John Terry and Vincent Kompany – modern game greats who'd lifted the Premier League trophy as captain.

I got released by Notts County when I was a teenager and played men's football for a local semi-professional side called Dunkirk. I didn't reach the Premier League until I was 30, and now I'd won it – nobody could ever take that away from me.

I loved football growing up. I was obsessed with it. I'd play wherever I could, for as long as possible – at school, on the road, up the park with my friends. I was constantly told off by my mum for kicking a ball around the house or smashing it against garage doors. Meadow Colts was my youth team. I quickly discovered I was quite a decent player and started getting selected for Nottingham City Boys, the district side, and then the county. I'd often play two matches on a Saturday, and another in midweek – I don't know how I had the energy for it.





Below Wes had to work hard to make it at Forest **Bottom** "I'll show you mine if you show me yours..."

I joined Notts County and learned loads during my time there, which came to an end when I was 16. Although I felt like I was on the right track and deserved a YTS contract, they picked two other players ahead of me. I was devastated. The club asked me if I still wanted to come back for pre-season, but that rejection left a bitter taste and I said no. I took their decision to heart. I decided to go to college and pursue my interest in business studies instead, while also playing for Dunkirk. The dream didn't totally die, but I became more of a realist.

Competing against adults at a young age helped to toughen me up, but the college game offered a route back to the professional ranks. Our manager, Chris Dowhan, spotted something in me. He had links to Nottingham Forest and arranged a trial. I was desperate to show what I could do, but didn't have high expectations. I knew there was no guarantee I'd have a career in the game. I was playing for fun more than anything.

My trial was only meant to last a week, but Forest kept extending it. I was stronger and faster than most lads, with a good mentality. I loved to defend and was determined not to be beaten, but my technique was a little raw. As much as the coaches liked me, they had concerns about my fitness levels. I've always been a pretty big guy, but at the time I was overweight and out of shape. Before joining Forest, I was training once a week and most lunchtimes I'd pop to the chip shop with my mates from college.



Beyond a certain level of effort and ability, you need coaches who believe in you and a fair amount of luck to become a footballer. I saw much more talented players than me fail to make it. Credit to John Pemberton and Chris Fairclough for seeing my potential and sticking with me in those early days at Forest. That made all the difference.

I worked so hard to get fit and eventually got my chance in the youth team when we travelled abroad for a tournament. I played well and we won the whole thing. That was a turning point for me – I became a regular from then on.

My first experience of professional football came on loan at Kidderminster Harriers in February 2003. I'd just turned 19 and was playing consistently well for Forest's reserves. Paul Hart, the first-team manager, wanted me to go and prove that I was ready to take the next step. That month in the old Third Division, what is now League Two, helped me on and off the pitch. For the first time, I was living alone away from home, in a hotel and playing matches that mattered.

Football in the lower leagues was different 20 years ago. Players trained hard but were nowhere near as professional as they are today. Kidderminster's striker Bo Henriksen used to pick me up from the hotel to take me to training and have a smoke on the way. The one thing that really stood out was the players going to the bar and drinking pints with the supporters after every game. That was an eye-opener, but the guys were great. I learned so much about the effect a crowd can have on you, controlling your nerves and staying focused for 90 minutes, which set me up for the future.

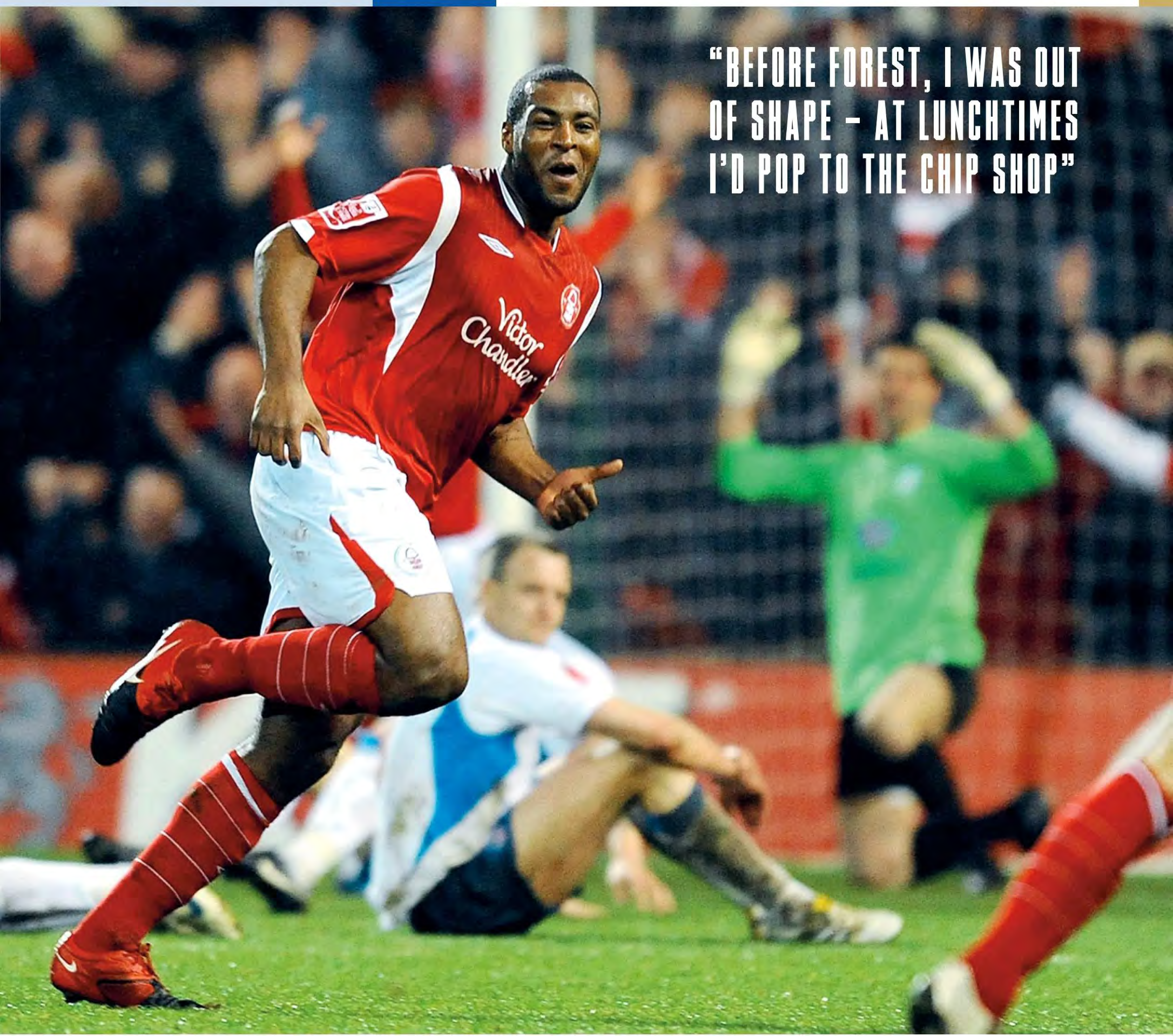
My Forest debut arrived at the start of the next season. After losing in the First Division play-offs, some of our best players had left and an opportunity presented itself. Almost by default, I was thrown into the side. It was a baptism of fire, but I performed well and never looked back. I always felt I was good enough to compete at that level. I believed that my strength, speed and fighting spirit would see me through, and it did.

Despite my confidence, there's pressure playing for your hometown club, particularly one as big as Forest. Many of my friends and family supported them, and I was so keen to impress. Although I did well on an individual level, the team had lost plenty of quality and experience, so we struggled.

In 2005, at the end of only my second full season in the first team, we were relegated to League One. It was a colossal failure that hurt our pride.

I never doubted my ability, even as more tough times followed. Most people assumed we'd instantly return to the Championship in 2005-06, but things didn't work out that way. We found it extremely hard. Perhaps because of Forest's history and reputation, opponents seemed to relish taking us on. Every single game felt like such a slog, and there was a lot ▸

Below Morgan was desperate to dazzle at his hometown club



"BEFORE FOREST, I WAS OUT OF SHAPE – AT LUNCHTIMES I'D POP TO THE CHIP SHOP"



of frustration around the City Ground during that challenging period.

One match stands out above the rest: our infamous play-off semi-final defeat to Yeovil in 2007. I still see it repeated on television, so I'm not allowed to forget it. After comfortably winning the away leg 2-0, we expected to complete the job at home with the minimum of fuss. Somehow a chaotic night, one of the worst of my career, unfolded instead.

Nothing went to plan. I came on as a late substitute to help us see the game out, but it didn't work and we were forced into extra time. Then I made a very costly error, badly underhitting a backpass, and Lee Morris put Yeovil ahead in the tie for the first time. I felt awful. You're bound to make the occasional mistake as a footballer, but to do it on such a stage, when the stakes were enormously high, it was horrible.

Yeovil won 5-4 on aggregate and we were distraught, just like the fans. Upset and angry. One supporter chose to vent their frustration directly at me. We ended up confronting each other, yelling back and forth, before people intervened. I wasn't thinking clearly and it all happened in the heat of the moment. I wish it hadn't, but I cared about the club – I was desperate to do well.

That setback made automatic promotion the following year, at the third time of asking, so much sweeter. We showed character to redeem ourselves and I love looking back at photographs from that day – my first tangible achievement. After that, we pushed to reach the Premier League, coming third in 2009-10, but fell short under Billy Davies.

Eventually, it started to feel like we might never make it and I had to consider my own future. I was nearing the end of my contract and had interest from other clubs. Leicester was one of the most exciting options put in front of me. They'd recently been taken over, were investing heavily in the squad and had a clear ambition to play at the highest level, which was my main goal. It was a massive decision. Nottingham Forest was all I knew, so leaving was tough. After nearly 10 years and more than 400 games at one club, it felt like the right time to go.

At Leicester, I was the new boy and had to prove myself all over again. It helped that Nigel Pearson was the manager and had not long taken over. He convinced me that I'd be a big part of his plans and made me captain within six months. We had a really positive relationship built on mutual respect. He liked my mentality and the way I led by example, similar to how he'd been as a player.

When I first joined Leicester, we had heaps of talent but lacked the togetherness you need to be successful. Nigel's main focus was to bring the right characters into the club. It was brilliant to see that change and how we bonded throughout his time in charge. The combination we settled on was perfect, but we had to work hard to seal our place in the Premier League and suffered some agonising moments along the way.

Our 2013 play-off semi-final defeat against Watford still hurts to this day. It was such an insane and dramatic ending to a game, one of the most iconic in play-off history. We were one kick away from the final at Wembley but, after Anthony Knockaert's penalty was saved, Watford went straight up the other end and Troy Deeney scored at the death. Everything happened so quickly that we couldn't even catch our breath. We were stunned, and the dressing room was silent afterwards.

"AT 1-0 UP IN THE FA CUP FINAL, I WENT ON – IT WAS A FITTING WAY TO FINISH OFF MY CAREER"

But that experience made us even stronger. We remembered how that moment felt and were determined not to go through it again. The next season, we broke records en route to winning the title. At last I had the chance to test myself against the very best. I fought so hard to get to the top – finally managing it represented a huge milestone in my career.

We were all excited for a new challenge, but knew how tough it would be to survive. We played well at times and were unlucky to lose certain games, but the Premier League is a ruthless place. By the start of April 2015 we were bottom of the table, seven points adrift of safety with nine matches left, and seemingly doomed.

Nigel tinkered with our defensive system and that made a difference. A couple of late goals gave us some crucial results and bags of belief. From nowhere, the momentum swung our way and we completed the great escape by winning seven games, taking an unlikely 22 points from 27 available. That was title-winning form.

Most of the pundits had written us off and we enjoyed proving them wrong. We did the same the following campaign, in even more spectacular fashion. We'd been hoping to build on our late dash for survival under Nigel Pearson, but he was unexpectedly sacked in June and replaced by Claudio Ranieri. I was heartbroken. We'd shared some epic times together, but football can be cruel. Managers are always on the chopping block and things quickly move on. You rarely have any time to stop and think.

That summer was a strange one for me. While my team-mates adapted to Ranieri's methods, I was on the other side of the world playing for Jamaica at the Copa America and then Gold Cup, reaching the final of the latter. I basically missed the whole of pre-season and returned to Leicester a week before our first league match. I fretted about whether





Clockwise from below Wes and Nige were an ace Leicester duo; Blue Steel, Forest style; an excellent 2015 Gold Cup run with Jamaica preceded the impossible job



Above FA Cup final glory gave Wes the perfect retirement gift

I'd even be in the team, but Ranieri showed faith in me. I didn't miss a single minute of action as we achieved the impossible.

N'Golo Kante joined us around the same time I got back from international duty, and his first training session left the whole squad in awe. We didn't know very much about him before he arrived and were stunned by how talented he was. He was just everywhere. No one I've ever played with has made such a big impression as quickly as Kante. We had a system that worked perfectly, and he was absolutely integral to it. It was like having an extra man in midfield.

So many of that team performed to their maximum that campaign. All the pieces fell into place. Jamie Vardy couldn't stop scoring; Riyad Mahrez raised his game to a new level; Shinji Okazaki put in so much selfless work, as did Marc Albrighton and Danny Drinkwater. Everyone played a part and the defence was rock solid, with myself and Robert Huth at the heart of it. We could soak up pressure and hit teams on the counter-attack.

Loads of people underestimated us. Even though we kept picking up results, everyone assumed we'd fall away – they didn't start taking us seriously until the final stages of the season. Ranieri did a top job with the media by downplaying everything while setting the team short-term targets.

When we won 3-1 away at Manchester City in February, I started to think, 'Wow, maybe we could pull off a miracle'. By that point, we had so much confidence that we could go out and beat anyone.

It was incredible to be part of that squad. I was proud to captain them. Everyone got on and respected each other. We spent lots of time together off the pitch, too. We'd have a meal out or a casino night to celebrate and build that camaraderie, which was fantastic. The little moments stay with you. Okazaki couldn't speak much English, but he went on the karaoke one night and that's all anyone was talking about the next week at training.

As vice-captain, Kasper Schmeichel was my right-hand man and we'd talk through things together. He was so driven, demanding the best from himself and others. Vardy was an influence, but in a very different way. There's so much footage of him doing or saying silly stuff. He was the guy who could cut through the seriousness and bring us back down to earth by making light of situations. He also set the standard on the pitch with his work rate and aggression.

After drawing against Manchester United at Old Trafford, we knew we'd win the title if Spurs failed to win at Chelsea on the Monday night. We wanted to gather somewhere to watch the game and take it in by ourselves. Vardy put out the offer and most of the lads accepted. As a group, we didn't really want the limelight, but the media team managed to convince us to have some cameras there. I'm glad they did because it was awesome to capture those amazing celebrations. After all, we'd completed one of the greatest underdog stories in history. In any sport.

Although realistically there was no chance of replicating that success, we didn't slack off. Over the next few years, we did well in the Champions League, remained among the top 10 in the Premier League and then won the FA Cup, which was the next best thing. I was fortunate to keep playing at the highest level until 37, but it got tougher as time went on. My final season was difficult, as I was often injured. My body felt like it needed a rest.

Knowing I was going to retire, I wanted to get fit enough to have one last game on the grass and say goodbye to all the fans. I was buzzing simply to be in the squad for the FA Cup final. I had no idea how it would pan out, but it couldn't have gone better. At 1-0 up, Brendan Rodgers sent me on to help protect our lead and clinch some more silverware for Leicester. It was a fitting way to finish off my career – I'd end on my own terms.

Growing up in The Meadows, life was tough and just making it as a professional footballer was an achievement. I never took anything for granted, but hard graft, dedication and character can take you a hell of a long way – with a bit of luck, too.

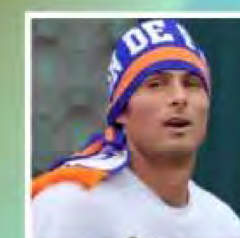
I'm proud to say I devoted almost 20 years of my life to the game, making in excess of 700 appearances. My career path may have been different to most players, peaking in my 30s, but I wouldn't have had it any other way.












30 MOST SURPRISING TITLE WINNERS

FFT assesses the most shocking champions of the past 50 years. Will this campaign deliver even more upsets?

Words Ben Hayward











30 ISTANBUL BASAKSEHIR

Istanbul clubs dominate Turkish football, but it's always Galatasaray, Fenerbahce or Besiktas who bag the title. Not since Gunes triumphed in 1938 had another Istanbul outfit won it – until 2020, when Basaksehir clinched top spot, despite crowds of under 2,000 for some matches, even before COVID. **KEY MEN** With reported links to Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Basaksehir recruited both Demba Ba and Robinho.

29 GENT

Gent and Genk have won five league titles between them, but almost nobody outside of Belgium knows which club is which. Gent's only title came in 2015, after they'd finished seventh and 11th the previous two seasons. Even in their title campaign, the Buffalos were runners-up to Club Brugge during the regular season, before winning the play-off. **KEY MAN** Forward Laurent Depoitre earned a move to Porto and later Huddersfield.

28 ASTON VILLA

Villa are seven-time champions, but six of them came between 1894 and 1910. They had to wait 71 years to win it again in 1981. At that point, Villa hadn't made the top three since 1933, having finished seventh in 1980 and been in the Third Division in 1972. Being crowned English champions wasn't enough and Villa won the European Cup a year later. **THE BOSS** Ron Saunders legged it to rivals Birmingham a few months later. Strange.

27 TIJUANA

Formed in 2007, Tijuana's crest is a picture of the founder's hairless xoloitzcuintle dog, also the inspiration for the side's terrifying mascot Xolo Mayor. Perhaps it scared their rivals – within three years, they'd gained promotion to the Liga MX; two years after that, they'd won the Apertura title. No Mexican club had been champions so soon after promotion. **KEY MEN** Colombian forward Duvier Riascos, who pretended to be a snake when he scored.

26 ATLETICO MADRID

Atletico Madrid may be Spain's third biggest club, but in 2014, Barcelona had Lionel Messi, Real Madrid had Cristiano Ronaldo and it was absurd to consider anyone breaking the duopoly. That is until Diego Simeone helped the Rojiblancos anti-football their way to the title, winning it at the Camp Nou of all places. **KEY MEN** Diego Costa, notoriously mardy Thibaut Courtois and shoe-throwing expert Arda Turan. A collection of absolute villains.

25 JAGIELLONIA BIALYSTOK

The Polish side went into the 2023-24 season having never won the league, and finishing 12th and 14th during the previous two seasons. Near enough doubling their goal tally helped, as they powered to glory ahead of rivals like Legia Warsaw, pipping Slask Wroclaw on head-to-head record. **THE BOSS** Adrian Siemieniec – the youngest manager in Polish top-flight history when hired at the tender age of 31 a year earlier.


24


23



21


19

24 TRABZONSPOR

When Galatasaray finish a season down in 13th, something strange is happening. That's how it was in 2021-22, when the Turkish Super Lig trophy made a rare venture outside of Istanbul to Trabzon. Romping to the title under Abdullah Avci, eight points clear of Fenerbahce, it led to the mother of all parties on the streets of the Black Sea city. **KEY MEN** Mohawk maestro Marek Hamsik and Edin Visca, title-winner with Basaksehir.

23 WOLFSBURG

Backed by car giants Volkswagen, *Die Wolfe* had finished 15th in consecutive Bundesliga seasons before Felix Magath arrived in 2007, deployed his cheese-rubbing techniques and won the league two years later. Despite winning just three of their opening nine games, a run of 14 wins in their last 16 meant they clinched their only league title. **KEY MEN** Brazilian striker Grafite and future Manchester City champion Edin Dzeko.

22 DEPORTIVO LA CORUNA

Deportivo spent the entire 1980s in the Segunda Division but, after an agonising last-minute penalty miss cost them a La Liga title in 1994, they won it six years later for the first and only time in their history. Javier Irureta's side were aided by young star Lionel Scaloni, who was clearly taking notes. **WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?** Deportivo dropped to the third tier in 2020, but were promoted back to the second division for this season.

21 LENS

The northern French city may not be a hot tourist destination – according to Tripadvisor, one of its main attractions is a slag heap – but its residents will never forget the events of 1998. Lens were saved from relegation the previous year by boss Roger Lemerre – when he departed, Daniel Leclercq took them to the title, surging from sixth at halfway. **KEY MEN** Anto Drobnjak top-scored in a side with Vladimir Smicer and Marc-Vivien Foe.

20 ARTMEDIA BRATISLAVA

After going through several name changes in the 1990s and early Noughties, including Hydronika Petrzalka and Artmedia Petrzalka, the advertising agency-sponsored Artmedia Bratislava shot to the Slovakian title in 2005. They then thrashed Celtic 5-0 on their way to the Champions League group stage. **WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?** Relegation to the fifth tier by 2014, after the owner left to take over traditional powerhouses Slovan. Ah...

19 LEEDS

Two years before Leeds pipped Manchester United to the title in 1992, they were in the Second Division. Howard Wilkinson was the mastermind, before a rather more bizarre spell at Sunderland, when he showed his squad he was prepared to grasp the nettle – by literally pulling some out of a carrier bag. **KEY MEN** Gary McAllister, David Batty, Gary Speed, Gordon Strachan – some midfield. Eric Cantona rocked up for the final few games.

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18 VLADIKAVKAZ

After the fall of the USSR, 14 of Russia's first 15 titles were won by Moscow clubs – the exception was Spartak-Alania Vladikavkaz, from North Ossetia near the Georgian border, in 1995. Despite Alania being named after a medieval kingdom of Alans, only one of their squad was called Alan. **WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?** Kicked out of the league for irregularities in 2006, they went bust in 2014 and are now in the second tier.

17 AZ ALKMAAR

Everyone's favourite madman Louis van Gaal had a point to prove when he joined AZ – his second spell at Barcelona ended with the club 12th. AZ finished 11th in the Eredivisie, but crafty Louis was lulling everyone into a false sense of security – in 2008, the Cheese Farmers bagged the title. Unlike Felix Magath, no actual cheese was involved. **KEY MEN** Mousa Dembele and Manchester United bench-warmer Sergio Romero.

16 BLACKBURN

A population of 125,000 puts the Lancashire town in England's top 50 biggest places, but in 1995 it was the home of the Premier League champs. Kenny Dalglish teamed up with steel magnate Jack Walker to lead the club out of the second tier and to the title – a bloke called Alan Shearer played his part. **WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?** Dalglish stepped down, followed by a dismal Champions League campaign, then relegation in 1999.

15 LILLE

PSG had Neymar and Kylian Mbappe in their ranks for the 2020-21 season, having just reached the Champions League final, so surely they'd win the league? Wrong. Things unravelled under Thomas Tuchel, as they always do, and the Parisians appointed trophy jinx Mauricio Pochettino. Lille took advantage, winning Ligue 1 by a point. **KEY MEN** Future France No.1 Mike Maignan, and a 37-year-old Jose Fonte (without specs).

14 ROCHA

Just six years after being founded, Rocha became the first Uruguayan club from the 'interior' to win an Apertura or Clausura, when they bagged the former in 2005. After edging out Nacional, they celebrated by doing a lap of honour with a cow that had been brought to the stadium by a journalist. **WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?** Battered 5-0 by Velez Sarsfield in the Copa Libertadores, they're now down in the amateur leagues.

13 BURSASPOR

No team from outside Istanbul had won the Turkish league for 26 years when the Crocodiles triumphed in 2010, pipping Fenerbahce by a point. They had previously come nowhere near the title, with their only other trophy being the 1986 Turkish Cup. **WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?** They signed Scott Carson and Kenny Miller, then moved into a fancy stadium in the shape of a crocodile. They were relegated to the fourth tier in May.

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12 BANFIELD

Named after an English railway engineer who drove the first locomotive through Buenos Aires in 1857, Banfield drove a (figurative) coach and horses through Primera Division defences on the way to the Apertura title in 2009, having occupied the bottom half the previous season. It was their first title after 113 years in existence.
KEY MAN A teenage James Rodriguez, shortly before he headed to FC Porto.

11 TAVRIYA SIMFEROPOL

Tavriya spent only one season in the top division during the days of the Soviet Union, so it was something of a shock when they beat Dynamo Kyiv to the first Ukrainian Premier League title after independence in 1992. They never came close again.
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT? Simferopol is in Crimea, so when Russia annexed the region, they moved to Kherson, which was then invaded in 2022, prompting Tavriya to fold.

10 FC TWENTE

Poor Steve McClaren: he won the only Eredivisie title in FC Twente's history, but people only remember that time he spoke English on TV with a weird Dutch accent. After his disastrous spell with England, 'Schteve' moved to the Netherlands and denied Ajax and Luis Suarez the title in 2010.
KEY MEN Fulham forward Bryan Ruiz, and Wigan FA Cup winner Ronnie Stam, recently arrested on suspicion of money laundering.

09 RIJEKA

Rijeka is a beautiful city, but the team's ramshackle 8,000-capacity stadium has an away end that resembles a cage. Emerging from the shadows of Croatia's biggest clubs, it was they, not Hajduk Split, who interrupted Dinamo Zagreb's run of 18 titles in 19 years when they secured top spot in 2017 – the first time they'd ever been champions.
THE BOSS Matjaz Kek, who led Slovenia to that 0-0 draw against England at Euro 2024.

08 NOTTINGHAM FOREST

Given that Forest went on to bag successive European Cups, winning the league may not seem like a big deal, but it was seismic. Brian Clough took over during a season in which they finished 16th in the Second Division. They were promoted in 1977, and a year later won the First Division for the only time.
DID YOU KNOW? Forest are the only club to have won the European Cup more times than their own domestic championship.

07 LARISSA

Only one club outside Athens or Thessaloniki has won the Greek league – Larissa in 1988. In the title run-in, a player failed a drugs test and the club was deducted four points. Angry fans blocked the motorways and railways for five days until the decision was overturned. Larissa clinched the title by three points.
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT? In 2021, the boss was sacked for insulting two stars who were late for training as they were buying a cake.



06 BOAVISTA

Portuguese titles aren't exactly spread around either. Apart from Benfica, Porto and Sporting, the only other winners were Belenenses in 1946 and Boavista in 2001. Jaime Pacheco's men clinched the league by one point from city rivals Porto – the runners-up then recruited Jose Mourinho and Boavista's reign was soon over.
KEY MAN Goalkeeper Ricardo, before he was England's chief irritant at tournaments.

05 KAISERSLAUTERN

When Kaiserslautern got relegated and won the cup in the same season in 1996, they didn't imagine they'd be German champions within two years. In came Greece's future Euro 2004-winning boss Otto Rehhagel, who guided the club to promotion and then the title in successive seasons, with an identical W19 D11 L4 record during both campaigns.
KEY MEN A veteran Andreas Brehme and a whippersnapper called Michael Ballack.

04 OBILIC

Aside from Red Star and Partizan Belgrade, Serbia's only other champions were fellow capital club Obilic in 1998. Two years earlier, they'd been taken over by ex-paramilitary chief Arkan, later indicted for war crimes. Reports suggested he threatened opposition players, even locking one up in a garage.
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT? Despite hiring snipers to protect him, Arkan was gunned down at a hotel in 2000 and Obilic faded.

03 MONTPELLIER

When PSG were taken over by Qatar Sports Investments in 2011, they were expected to dominate French football. Instead, Montpellier rose to become champions for the only time in their history in 2012, despite finishing 14th the year before. Eccentric club president Louis Nicollin dyed his hair in the orange and blue club colours to celebrate.
KEY MAN Olivier Giroud struck 21 league goals and earned a transfer to Arsenal.

02 VERONA

Attempting to top Serie A in 1984-85 was daunting – Michel Platini's Juventus won the European Cup that season, Roma reached the final a year earlier and Napoli had Diego Maradona. Somehow, Verona sneaked through to lift the only Scudetto in their history. No wonder they call it a miracle.
THE BOSS Osvaldo Bagnoli spent nine years at the helm, but Verona quickly dropped back into the bottom half of the table.

01 LEICESTER

If Nottingham Forest winning the league after promotion was impressive in 1978, by 2016 the financial gulf had grown so wide that a repeat seemed impossible. But after narrowly avoiding the drop in their first year back in the top flight, gaffer Claudio Ranieri delivered one of the greatest seasons ever.
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT? Ranieri was sacked nine months later after losing 2-1 to Sevilla in a Champions League knockout tie. Harsh...

THE SUMMER OF TOTAL FOOTBALL

The Pep Guardiola philosophy was born 50 years ago from the Dutch genius of Johan Cruyff, Rinus Michels & Co. The Netherlands stole the show at the 1974 World Cup – *FFT* asks that team about a legacy not even a skinny-dipping final defeat can deny

Words Ed McCambridge



"Before that summer, the Netherlands was known for tulips and windmills. After it, we were known for football."

Rinus Michels was nearly right. In the decade preceding 1974, the Dutch coach's once conservative and proudly unremarkable homeland had buzzed with counter culture invention, from art and music to architecture – he just didn't know where to look. Clearly not the Amsterdam Hilton, the venue for John Lennon and Yoko Ono's anti-Vietnam war bed-in. Michels' revolution was every bit as important.

Dutch football wasn't even professional throughout much of his own middling playing career, but the young Ajax coach would go on to change the face of the sport after taking charge in the summer of 1965.

"He replaced ageing pros with youngsters from amateur teams, like myself," recalls left-back Ruud Krol, who played more than 400 Ajax games between 1968 and 1980. "He insisted on excellent fitness from every player. That was how it all started."

Nicknamed 'the Sphinx' for his immovable visage, Michels transformed the relegation candidates into a team that claimed four Eredivisie titles and three KNVB Cups over the next six years. Mop-haired and rock-star adjacent, Ajax were inspired by swaggering frontman Johan Cruyff. "He was the team's brain on the field," Krol tells *FFT*. "Michels picked the team – Cruyff conducted it."

In a side built on collective effort, the coach allowed one star to shine brightest. "They ►

said he would have made a good ballet dancer," reflected Michels. "Honestly, Johan could have become anything he wanted to." Indeed, the great Rudolf Nureyev, when not performing, used to watch Ajax and Cruyff.

Yet it was a defeat that recast a talented side from brilliant into iconic. "We lost the 1969 European Cup Final 4-1 against Milan," remembers Krol, who broke into the XI that summer. "They sat deep, soaked up pressure and hit us on the break. After that match, it became Michels' ambition to find a way to break down defensive teams. He wanted to find a way to pull them apart and force opponents to go places they didn't want to."

Michels devised a new system based on the fluid interchanging positions. If a full-back pushed forward, a midfielder dropped back. In turn, a forward would fall into midfield and another player would drive into the space left behind. Suddenly, opponents didn't know who they were marking.

"Between league games, we'd test it out against local amateur sides," recounts Krol. "We'd play friendlies against smaller clubs; interchanging positions, pressing high, setting offside traps. Michels wanted us to do it without thinking. Soon, we could."

The strategy, dubbed *Totaalvoetbal*, proved so bamboozling that Ajax became the most feared side on the planet, winning three consecutive European Cups between 1971 and 1973 – the latter two without Michels, who left for Barcelona after six glittering years. "We were really sad to lose Michels but his replacement, Stefan Kovacs, kept the philosophy alive," says Krol. "It became the Ajax blueprint." Cruyff, meanwhile, scooped the Ballon d'Or twice at Ajax before following Michels to the Camp Nou in 1973.

Despite their continental dominance, Ajax were challenged throughout the early 1970s by Ernst Happel's tough, street-smart and technically assured Feyenoord. Indeed, Michels copied the 'Ajax' 4-3-3 from the Rotterdam giants, who won two Eredivisie titles, a European Cup and a UEFA Cup in the same three-year period. "We were no worse than Ajax," legendary playmaker Wim van Hanegem, Feyenoord's answer to Cruyff, later said. "We were hugely successful."

"ANYONE WANT A CIGAR?"

Despite a thriving domestic game, the Dutch were nobodies on the international stage, having last qualified for a World Cup in 1938 and never reached a Euros. "We kept falling short," explains Krol, who won 83 Oranje caps. "We saw low crowds for our matches. But there was a recognition ahead of the 1974 World Cup that things had to change."

Led by Czech coach Frantisek Fadrhonc, they topped their qualification group ahead of 1974, to be hosted by neighbours West Germany. It went down to the wire, with rivals Belgium having an 89th-minute winner ruled out for a non-existent offside in the final, crucial game of the campaign. The match finished 0-0 – Belgium missed out, even though they'd not conceded a single goal in their six qualifiers. "We rode our luck," admits Krol. "I dread to think how different things might have been had we not made it."

Fadrhonc left his post four months before the tournament, the Dutch FA spooked by the near miss. Splitting his time between Barcelona and the national team, Michels became the first Dutch boss of the Oranje for nearly 20 years after four Austrians, one Romanian, a West German and Englishmen George Hardwick and Denis Neville.

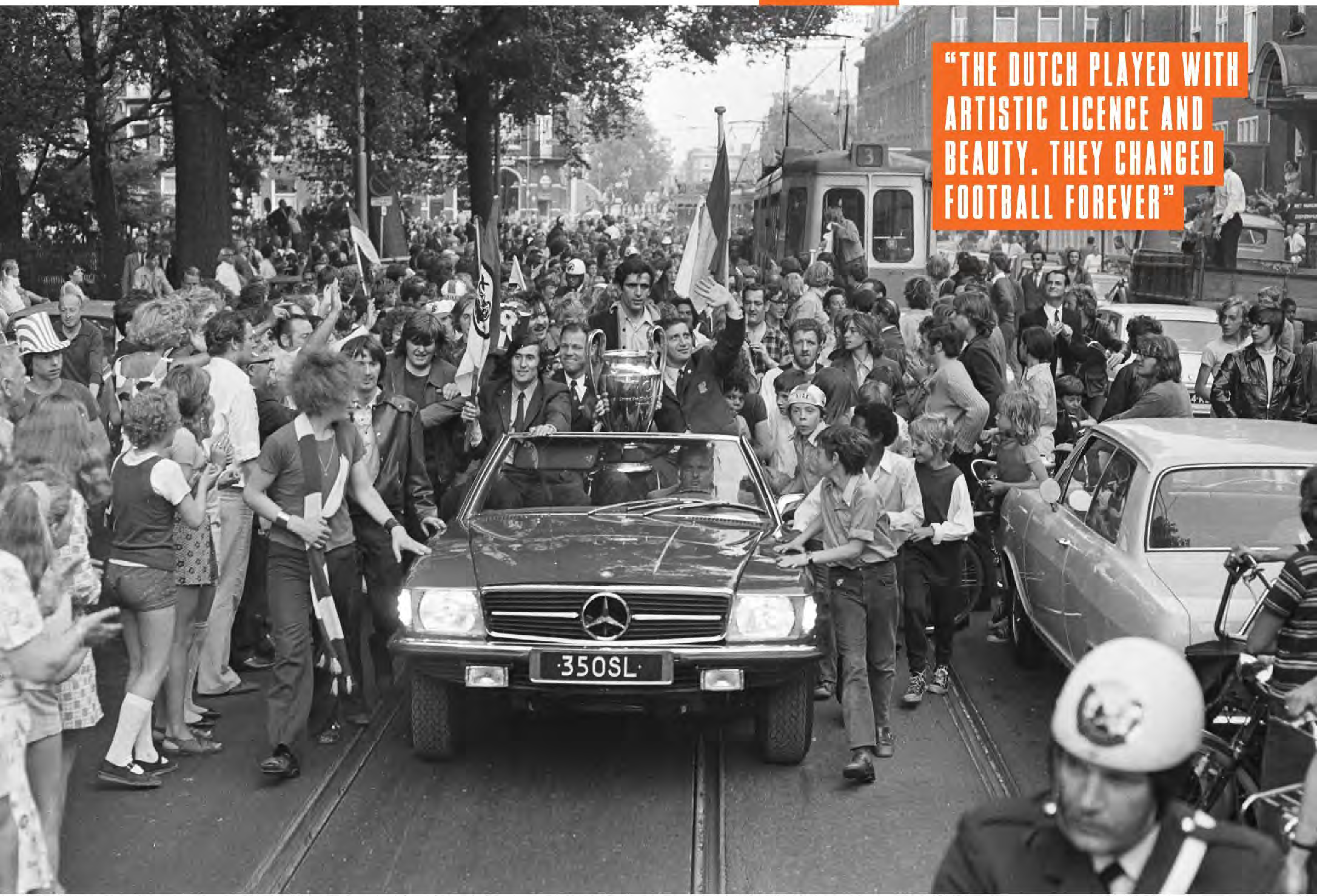
"When I heard Michels was the new coach, I was happy because I knew his philosophy would be perfect," says Krol. "But I was also unhappy, because I remembered how hard we'd now have to work!"

Michels set about implementing Total Football on the national team: positional rotation, relentless pressing and a reliance on the offside trap. For the system to work, personnel changes were required.

"He needed fast defenders," says Wim Rijsbergen, handed his Oranje debut just 10 days before 1974's curtain-raiser. "I was known for my pace at Feyenoord, so he brought me in to play centre-back. The squad was made up of several Ajax players, with seven of us from Feyenoord and some from elsewhere. We had to learn fast."

One of Michels' biggest calls was to drop PSV and Dutch No.1 Jan van Beveren for Jan Jongbloed, FC Amsterdam's 33-year-old cigar shop owner, who had won his only international cap a dozen years previously.

Below Ajax's European Cup kings provided the bedrock for success in 1974



"THE DUTCH PLAYED WITH ARTISTIC LICENCE AND BEAUTY. THEY CHANGED FOOTBALL FOREVER"

"Van Beveren was one of Europe's best shot-stoppers but he rarely came off his line," Rijsbergen tells *FFT*. "Jongbloed wasn't a very good goalkeeper, but he was brilliant at sweeping behind the defence; great with his feet. Michels made it clear: his defenders had to be the first line of attack."

Things didn't click right away. "We played a poor friendly against Austria before the tournament and the press were saying we were going to go out in the first round," recalls Johan Neeskens, a member of Ajax's three-time European Cup champions and one of the squad's youngest members that summer. "But then we beat Argentina 4-1 and the mood changed. The Feyenoord players were intelligent. They learned fast and complemented us perfectly."

Either side of Rijsbergen, Ajax full-backs Wim Suurbier and Krol were tasked with getting up and supporting attacks. Arie Haan, ostensibly Rijsbergern's centre-back partner, was a deep-lying playmaker at Ajax who'd drop into the back four out of possession but, with the ball, pushed into midfield to dictate the tempo.

Michels' midfield three – Neeskens, plus Van Hanegem and future Celtic boss Wim Jansen – were the perfect blend: a runner, a passer and a destroyer. "I was a box-to-box player," Neeskens tells *FFT*. "Cruyff would initiate the press, then I'd go with him – that's how the team got its signals."

Up front, Anderlecht's slaloming left-winger Rob Rensenbrink and Johnny Rep, a free-scoring Ajax forward popular with female fans, flanked Cruyff. "Of course, everyone could move anywhere within that formation," says Rijsbergen. "It wasn't unusual for Cruyff to collect the ball from the goalkeeper as our deepest player."

"Michels organised the team off the pitch," captain Cruyff famously later remarked. "On the field, it was mine."

CRUYFF TURNS IT ON

Ever the autocrat, Cruyff was the only player exempt from the alphabetical squad number diktat – he kept No.14, while reserve forward Ruud Geels wore No.1 and keeper Jongbloed a criminal No.8 – but the shirts themselves proved an even more contentious issue.

When the players ran out for their opening game against Uruguay, each Oranje top featured usual Adidas trimming – bar one. Contracted to Puma on the other side of the Dassler brother divide, Cruyff insisted on one of the stripes' removal before taking the field, despite a lucrative KNVB deal.

"They thought they didn't need to because the shirt was theirs," Cruyff later sniffed. "But the head sticking out of it is mine."

Despite the fuss, Rep struck twice to secure a maiden Dutch victory at a World Cup. "We didn't play particularly well," says Krol. "It was the opening game, which is always a bit cagey. But Uruguay were considered a big name, so it gave us confidence."

The Netherlands' second game of the group against Sweden finished 0-0, but provided the moment that football fans around the world still associate with that summer. In the 24th minute, on the left wing and with Jan Olsson breathing down his neck, Cruyff (who else?) faked to cross, flicked the ball behind his standing leg with his instep, swivelled 180 degrees and sped away. The 'Cruyff turn' didn't just twist a Swedish right-back's blood and floor an entire planet, it also inspired the next generation.

"I was watching on television with my dad – we looked at each other in astonishment," future England star Glenn Hoddle, 16 at the time, tells *FourFourTwo*. "Nobody had ever seen that before. I went into the garden that night, in pitch darkness, and tried to recreate it using the laundry pole as a defender."

Olsson, a great sport despite the public humiliation, remains bamboozled. "I don't understand how he did it," he later said. "Now, when I see the video, every time I think I've got the ball. I'm sure I'm going to take it, but every time he surprises me."

Only Cruyff's team-mates were blasé about it. "I'd seen him do it in Ajax games," says Krol. "Of course, it had never been done in front of that kind of audience before. He made it look so effortless."

Krol inadvertently scored an own goal in the Orange's final group game against Bulgaria, but the Netherlands swept to a 4-1 triumph. "I told Jongbloed that it isn't good for a goalkeeper to have quite so many clean sheets," the defender laughs now. "The own goal kept him on his toes!"







Clockwise from top Cruyff en route to beating Argentina 4-0; Neeskens on the spot; "Yep, we're achingly cool"

It would be the only goal the Dutch conceded until the final. With the tournament in full swing, golden boy Cruyff proved just as captivating away from the field as he was on it. As the squad tossed one Dutch journalist into a hotel pool for being overly critical of the team, another member of the fourth estate was seduced by Pythagoras In Boots' intellect. "Cruyff was a remarkable learner," wrote English football writer Brian Glanville. "Surrounded by a polyglot of journalists, he dealt effortlessly with them in Dutch, English, German, Spanish and Italian."

Thousands of additional Dutch football fans flocked to West Germany to watch a team now labelled 'The Clockwork Orange'. "We knew we were playing very well," says Neeskens. "But we didn't sit around talking about it. We had a job to do."

The job consisted of the second group stage, pitting them against Argentina, East Germany and defending world champions Brazil. Even the gods were behind them. "The heavens opened ahead of the first game and it didn't really stop," grins Krol. "Perfect Dutch weather – we took it as a sign."

In whipping rain, a Cruyff brace, Krol and Rep's third goal in four matches delivered a 4-0 hammering of Argentina, described as "so muddled by the Netherlands' movement, they could almost be heard asking for directions" in one German newspaper report. "Never in my life have I seen a player rule matches like Cruyff," said Jorge Valdano, ▶

then a teenager in Santa Fe, who went on to win the 1986 World Cup. "He ran the show."

After a 2-0 win against East Germany, came Brazil. A Selecao outfit featuring Jairzinho and Rivellino had also won their opening two second-round fixtures, making the Netherlands clash a semi-final in all but name – the group winners progressed directly to the final.

The game of the tournament thus far, in Dortmund's Westfalenstadion, was an end-to-end and often brutal encounter. Brazil had gilt-edged chances to take the lead, but it wasn't until the second half that Neeskens broke the deadlock, his sliding toe poke from Cruyff's slide-rule cross sailing over the goalkeeper. The captain then added a close-range volley to put the game to bed.

"It all came together in that game against Brazil," Cruyff later wrote. "That was probably the moment you could point to and say, 'That was Total Football'."

"It was," agrees Rijsbergen, "the best game we played that summer."

HUBRIS, MEET NEMESIS

Their opponents in Munich's final would be the hosts, West Germany – a rival that held significance far greater than national borders. Nazi Germany's occupation during the Second World War still carried huge cultural importance. Midfielder Van Hanegem lost his father, sister and two brothers in the conflict.

If the stakes weren't high enough already, a media storm intensified matters. Cruyff and his team-mates had come to feel hounded at their Hiltrup hotel – in desperate need of relief, they hosted a now infamous party





following their win over East Germany. Dutch rockers The Cats were invited to perform, with wine and cigars passed around until the small hours, when several of the players decided to go skinny-dipping in the pool with some local girls. An undercover reporter for German tabloid *Bild* published a story the following day, under the headline 'Cruyff, champagne, naked girls and a refreshing dip'.

"Johan spent hours on the phone to his wife leading up to that final," remembers Rijsbergen. "It was the worst preparation." The star man sat up late, smoking cigarettes alone in his bedroom. Many back home saw the story as a direct ploy by West Germany to unsettle their guests.

The show had to go on. The Dutch went into the final, in Munich's Olympiastadion, as favourites. "Even against a brilliant West Germany side, we had the belief to win that match," says Neeskens.

Such confidence was an affront to the hosts. "You could see it in their eyes," West Germany forward Bernd Holzenbein later said. "Their attitude was 'How many goals do you want to lose by today, boys?' I tried to look them in the eye, but I couldn't do it."

Less than two minutes in, a whitewash was on the cards. Cruyff collected the ball from deep and waltzed past several challenges before being fouled in the box. Neeskens rifled the penalty past Sepp Maier, the first German to touch the ball. "I changed my mind at the last second and tried to put it in the opposite corner," reveals the Dutchman. "It went down the middle. People thought that was very clever, but it was an accident."

The celebrations were in full swing as the Dutch began to toy with their opponents. "We thought to ourselves, 'They're Germans, they're not our friends'," said midfielder Van Hanegem. "Let's humiliate them."

"It was a classic case of pride coming before a fall," wrote Cruyff. "As soon as you're past that point of over-confidence, it becomes incredibly difficult to turn it around."

West Germany defender Berti Vogts began to shackle Cruyff in a bruising man-marking display. As the captain's influence waned, the hosts' confidence grew, with Holzenbein soon fouled in the Dutch area. Paul Breitner levelled the scores. "That should never have been a penalty," sighs Neeskens. "You could sense things starting to turn." Gerd Muller put West Germany ahead just before half-time.

Frustrated, Cruyff was booked at the break for complaining to English referee Jack Taylor about Vogts' keen interest in his shins. Heads had gone. "It was tense inside the changing room," says Rijsbergen. "We felt we'd lost that fluency. Our spark had gone."

"JOHAN SPENT HOURS ON THE PHONE TO HIS WIFE PRE-FINAL – THAT WAS THE WORST PREPARATION"



A SHOCK FOR THE AGES



The Netherlands rankled West German football fans like Ned Flanders irking Homer Simpson: for being admired and accomplished. Stupid, sexy Flanders. But East Germany were a different pain in the backside during the 1974 World Cup.

Separated by the Iron Curtain since the end of the Second World War, the two Germanys hadn't met in a full international before clashing in Hamburg, in the first group stage. The West expected to crush their neighbours (in their only World Cup), but lost to Jurgen Sparwasser's goal.

It meant that East Germany actually topped the group – 15 days later, though, West Germany were lifting the trophy.

Nor would they rediscover it. After another tense 45 minutes, Franz Beckenbauer lifted the shiny new cup in front of the home fans. Cruyff & Co looked on, crestfallen.

"When it was all over, of course, there was a great feeling of disappointment," he wrote. "You know you're the best in the world, but you haven't won the prize." Van Hanegem, consumed by thoughts of "murdered" (his word) family members, left the field in tears.

"It was a hugely disappointing defeat," reflects Krol. "We were entirely to blame. We were the better team. But in football it's not always the best team that wins."

That night the players went back to the hotel, drank wine and smoked cigarettes. The following morning, trophyless, they headed home, cursing their own hubris. Sat in silence on a bus ride into Amsterdam, they looked out of the window. "As we drew closer to the city, we started to see more and more orange flags and jerseys," says Neeskens. "Soon, thousands had come out to greet us. To thank us for our efforts. It was beautiful."

Clockwise from below Michels and Cruyff lead the Dutch off; Der Bomber bags der winner; Neeskens struck an early penalty

"We felt we'd let the nation down, but they didn't feel that way," says Rijsbergen. "We were invited to the palace to meet the royals and drink champagne. Crowds waved at us on the balcony. It was as if they'd fallen in love with the national team."

For Cruyff, that summer's legacy went far beyond mere silverware. "We had set an example for billions of people," he opined. "We had also given hope to all the players who, like me, weren't big or strong. The whole philosophy of how football should be played was adjusted during that tournament."

It also changed his individual status. Cruyff had twice been crowned Europe's best player, but it was only after the tournament that he felt his talents went global. Later that year, he won his third Ballon d'Or in four seasons.

That summer would be his only World Cup. Though he helped the Netherlands qualify for Argentina 1978, a kidnap attempt at his family home in Barcelona persuaded Cruyff to stay with his wife and not travel to South America. Coached by Ernst Happel, his team-mates reached a second consecutive final, only to lose to the host nation again. "That tournament was different," says Rijsbergen. "There was no Cruyff, no Michels. We were a good side, but nothing like 1974."

That generation went empty handed on the international stage – except Michels who coached his country to Euro 88 glory in West Germany, exorcising some ghosts. Rijsbergen sees the funny side. "When I go to my local butcher, he tells me, 'You're a national hero, Wim, but you won nothing, so you can pay the same as everyone else!' I have to laugh."

For most neutrals, the 1974 World Cup has always felt more like the Netherlands' than West Germany's, despite the final result. That summer, a limited full-back for Ligue 2 side Mulhouse saw "a completely different football". Thirty years on, Arsene Wenger led Arsenal to an unbeaten Premier League title.

For Hoddle, a Wenger disciple at Monaco, no one did it better. "They played football the right way, with artistic licence and beauty," he says. "They changed football for the better. They influenced the game forever."

Neeskens agrees. "I suppose that was our legacy," he concludes. "We played beautiful football. Sometimes that's its own prize."



Three smart coaches decorated in Liverpool's *You'll Never Walk Alone* livery edge slowly into heavy traffic in the rain outside Columbia's Williams-Brice Stadium. The Reds have just beaten Manchester United 3-0 in a college football stadium that boasts a larger capacity than Old Trafford and Anfield. Despite being staged in a South Carolina city with only 136,000 residents, well off the big-city track usually beaten by visiting European giants, it's the only game to have sold out during Manchester United and Liverpool's 2024 US pre-season tour, with 77,559 spectators inside the stadium to witness it.

With a severe weather warning and thunderstorms threatening the game, there's relief that it was played – soon after the final whistle, both English football giants are in a race to return to Manchester Airport. The word from both camps is that whoever gets there first will get unloaded first and the other team will have to wait. It's a fun, secret little battle for staff, another dimension to a storied rivalry, the image of two giant planes racing through the night across the Atlantic.

To get away quickly, Liverpool's players take part in no post-match media, while Manchester United put manager Erik ten Hag in the mixed zone and young player Rhys Bennett fronts for local TV. Liverpool duly get their headstart, but with the roads so jammed, they don't move fast. To their dismay, they then see Manchester United's coach speed past under police escort. The Red Devils reach the small airport first and take off four minutes before Liverpool, landing their chartered Virgin Atlantic Dreamliner at Manchester at 11.49am the following morning, 14 minutes before Liverpool's Atlas Air 747.

A TRIP TO MEET ROBBIE WILLIAMS

Manchester United and Liverpool, England's two best-supported and most successful clubs, adopted a similar approach to their pre-season tour of the USA, right down to where they wanted to be for their final game. Following criticism that previous tours were exhausting, they wanted to be in America's Eastern Time Zone, not three hours further west as Manchester United's pre-season tour in 2023 had been, which involved the team zigzagging from California to Texas and back.

The club's travelling staff was slimmed down under the club's new decision-makers, led by Sir Jim Ratcliffe, to 120 – fully 40 fewer than Liverpool. Both see the US as a key market. Manchester United have been touring the US regularly since 2003, playing to huge crowds in the biggest stadiums.

There are several reasons why United keep returning to the country that shares part of their name. The advances paid by promoters help the club to make a ballpark overall profit of £15 million from such a tour. Then there are the existing and potential sponsors in the world's biggest economy, plus a growing consumer market that can stand $150 match tickets (around £130) in large venues, and a lot more for executive tickets, as well as $140 replica shirts. Kits are launched to record sales – Manchester United's blue second strip came out while the team were in Los Angeles – with influencers engaged to promote them to a market of consumers who may know little about the club or their results, but now know that their shirt looks cute.

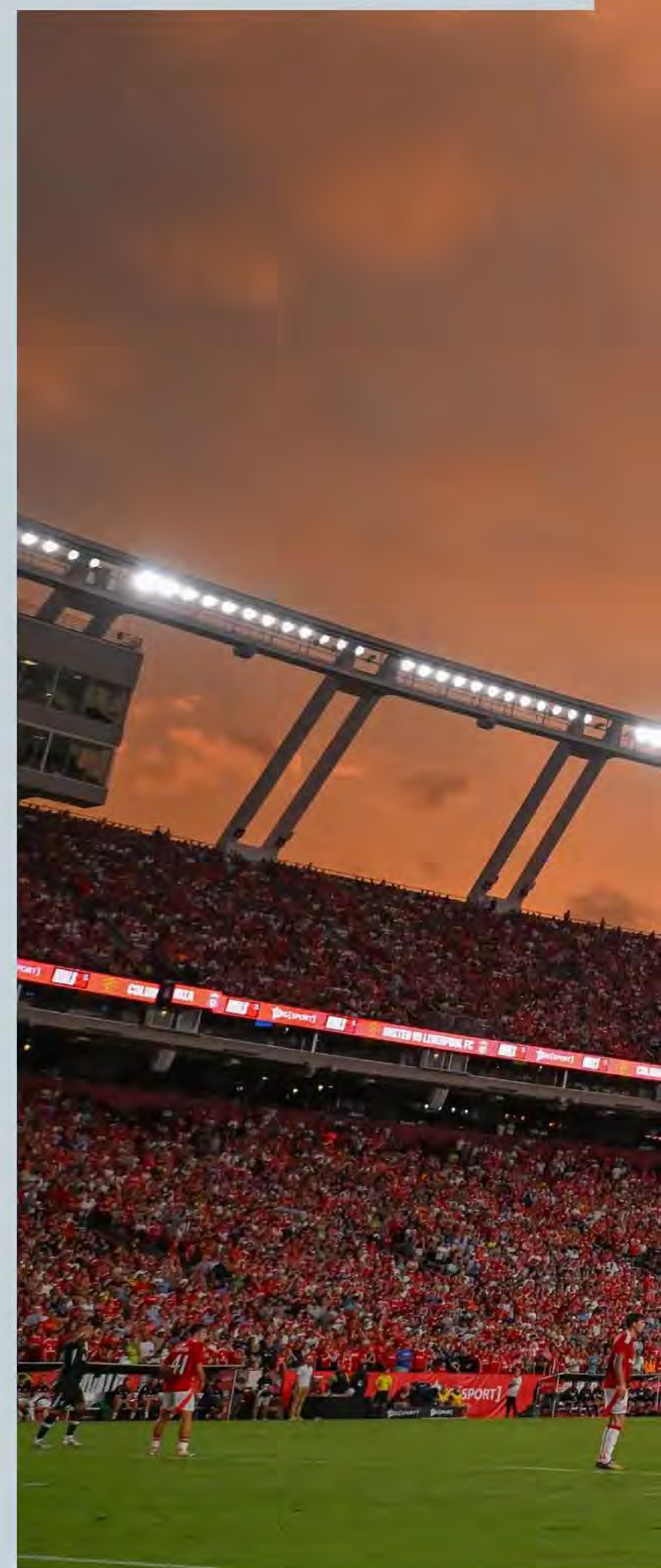
Managers acquiesce because their clubs are following the money and because the training facilities Stateside are of high quality. Players, often consumed by American culture, choose to holiday in Los Angeles or Las Vegas anyhow. They can enjoy sunshine and relative anonymity as small fry in LA's urban sprawl, where Robbie Williams will invite Harry Maguire and a couple of team-mates to one of his houses on their day off during the 11-day trip. They travel and train hard but are often spotted by the rooftop pool of their hotel, or walking around Beverly Hills, shopping or taking a coffee. This wouldn't have been possible on tours to Asia where the hotels are besieged by fans.

PLAYERS CAN ENJOY RELATIVE ANONYMITY IN LOS ANGELES, WHEREAS ON TOURS TO ASIA, HOTELS ARE BESIEGED BY FANS









The appeal of LA is one reason why Kobbie Mainoo, granted three weeks of holiday after helping England to reach the final of Euro 2024, chose the city as a place to chill after his breakthrough season, though he pops in to say hello to his team-mates. The midfielder was coming to prominence on last season's tour before an injury against Real Madrid in Houston. That game, originally scheduled for LA, was criticised because it meant more back-and-forward travel.

It was promised that this pre-season would be different, and it was – shorter in duration, fewer miles, three US games instead of four, a slimmed-down staff, one training centre in LA and one hotel (the discreet SLS in Beverly Hills). Players were given a plan including designated sleep and meal windows, with bespoke meals, a hydration programme and compression garments to increase blood circulation. We couldn't say for sure if it'll bring about any last-minute winners, but the Red Devils are now into details; training was scheduled to support players to shift their body clocks, with considerations made around exposure to light at the right time of day.

Pre-season is a chance for new players to integrate, with 18-year-old Lille recruit Leny Yoro made to feel at home by his Parisian-born team-mate Hannibal Mejbri and the French-speaking Amad Diallo. Manchester United's travelling squad is light on big names, but Casemiro wasn't selected in Brazil's Copa America squad while Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Harry Maguire weren't part of Euro 2024, so all of them are in the US – Casemiro, as skipper.

The Brazilian does no media because his future at Manchester United has been uncertain, but he takes the captaincy seriously and is aware that it isn't just about what he does on the pitch. At Manchester United's training base at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), he spots young supporter Alex Neild, who has travelled from Manchester to support his heroes. Casemiro takes Alex's wheelchair and pushes the delighted fan towards the main group of players for photos. There are around 1,000 supporters who've been invited to the session from the bleachers, mostly members of Manchester United's official supporters' clubs. They watch Rashford looking sharp, coach Darren Fletcher joining in training and the mood being positive.

For the non-playing senior staff – many of them new, after almost all of Manchester United's previous leadership team departed when Ratcliffe took over – it's a chance to network and get a feel for the club. Sir Dave Brailsford, director of sport for Ratcliffe's INEOS group, is at UCLA, where the upbeat vibe contrasts with the dire ambience in the same location in 2018 as Jose Mourinho put on the face of someone who didn't want to be in the job. Mourinho was relieved of his responsibilities a few months later.

VAN NISTELROOY IN, 250 STAFF OUT

Erik ten Hag's position was in serious doubt before May's FA Cup final. However, after his side stunned Manchester City at Wembley, fans overwhelmingly wanted him to stay and he's in confident mood on tour, looking more relaxed than at the end of last season.

That cup final victory injected optimism into the fanbase for the entire summer. The Dutchman knows that fans have limited patience, though, and serious improvement is expected for 2024-25. He says repeatedly that injuries ruined his plans last season, as United finished eighth in the Premier League.

When he is asked, "Can you give us just one reason why there were so many injuries?", Ten Hag instead lists several: "The number of games; the fixture list; many teams across the Premier League have injuries; bad luck," he says. "We had bad luck because almost all of our injuries were across the back four."

Gloomily, he adds that things could be even worse with the new extended formats ▸

Clockwise from below No filter required; his Euro 2024 snub made Rashford available; forget Eric and Ernie – here's Erik and Arne; taking the Manchester rain to California

COMING TO AMERICA

Ten Premier League clubs played friendlies in the US this summer – with mixed results...

	P	W	D	L
Liverpool	3	3	0	0
Crystal Palace	2	2	0	0
Wolves	3	2	0	1
Arsenal	3	1	1	1
Manchester City	4	1	1	2
MANCHESTER UNITED	**3**	**1**	**0**	**2**
Bournemouth	2	0	2	0
Chelsea	5	1	1	3
West Ham	2	0	0	2
Aston Villa	3	0	0	3



for European competitions this season, adding: "It's the survival of the fittest". In LA, Rasmus Hojlund and new signing Yoro both start well against Arsenal before picking up injuries, which rule them out for a significant period of time. They're the only clouds over Manchester United's California base.

Ten Hag and those above him have made changes and at UCLA he is surrounded by new staff, from new coaches Rene Hake and Ruud van Nistelrooy to sporting director Dan Ashworth and technical director Jason Wilcox. Another new first-team coach, Andreas Georgson, is announced while United are in LA. He, like Van Nistelrooy and Hake, had previously been a manager at a team in a smaller European league: Van Nistelrooy at PSV, Hake at FC Twente, Utrecht and Go Ahead Eagles, and Georgson – a Swede – at Lillestrom in Norway.

Van Nistelrooy and Fletcher (one of the few to retain his job) chat informally with the travelling journalists. They'll likely do little external media because Ten Hag, like most managers, wants to be the voice of his team, although his players are all obliged to speak. Under Ratcliffe, Manchester United will have more voices talking to the media, alleviating the pressure on Ten Hag to have an opinion on everything. It won't be difficult – the Glazers didn't speak.

"For the team, last season was a real disappointment, but we finished on a high," Harry Maguire tells *FFT* in LA. "There has been a lot of positive energy after that. There has been a lot of changes within the club with the hierarchy and the staff around the manager. I think that will help us. Ruud is an excellent coach – you can tell he's addicted to football. He loves analysing the game. I've been really impressed by his ideas."

Van Nistelrooy arrived as a coach after turning down the chance to manage Burnley. The Dutchman looks well and his arrival was appreciated by fans who remember him as a club legend. Players also revere him.

"He was a deadly striker and for him to pass on his knowledge straight away meant he had everyone's respect immediately," Jonny Evans explains. "Joining United is a great move for him and for the club. He seems very open and wants to improve people. You can see that he's early enough in his career that he's hungry to do well and pass on his abundance of knowledge. He's quite obsessed with defensive structure."



LA'S SOFI STADIUM IS SPARKING GENTRIFICATION IN THE AREA – SOMETHING SIR JIM RATCLIFFE WANTS AROUND OLD TRAFFORD

Evans also speaks sensitively about the job losses going on at Old Trafford. "It's been difficult to see," he admits. "The new owners feel that's the direction they want to go, but it's not been easy for everyone." A total of 250 staff – around a quarter of the workforce – learned they're about to lose their jobs on the same day that the team flew to America. Those staff are angry and frustrated. But they were also working for a loss-making company. Had Manchester United remained successful on the pitch, they could have lived more easily with higher wage costs, but continually missing out on the latter stages of Champions League football has finally bitten. Innocent staff, rather than underperforming and perhaps overpaid footballers, pay the price.

Most supporters see pre-season as an opportunity to look for signs of improvement, but few will read deeply into the results. A decade ago, Manchester United put three goals past Real Madrid in Michigan with 109,318 spectators in attendance, and then another three past Liverpool in Miami, as part of six straight wins in pre-season. One staffer thanked new boss Louis van Gaal for restoring order after David Moyes' spell. Then United lost their opening league game at home to Swansea, drew at Sunderland and Burnley, and lost 4-0 at MK Dons, all before August 2014 was over.



STADIUM INSPIRATION

What Manchester United do off the pitch with Ratcliffe at the helm is as intriguing as what happens on it. The tour's first match is in LA's stunning SoFi stadium, which can lay claim to being the best in the world. Mindful of their aim to build a world-leading stadium at Old Trafford, the club invite officials and the travelling press pack to a guided tour of the SoFi on the day after Arsenal beat Ten Hag's men 2-1 (though United win a penalty shoot-out, pre-arranged for entertainment purposes). Off-record comments are made and the story that follows is that Manchester United intend to build, from new, a 100,000-capacity stadium at Old Trafford.

Andrew Cole, in the US as one of the Red Devils' legends, puts his name to an article



on the club's website advocating a new stadium for Manchester United. "We have seen a glimpse of the future in Los Angeles, both on and off the pitch," he says. It's clear Ratcliffe is pushing for that over redeveloping Old Trafford.

The SoFi is situated in the private 300-acre Hollywood Park 'world-class sports and entertainment destination', and was built at the behest of LA Rams owner/chairman Stan Kroenke, head of the holding company that owns Arsenal. With 70,000 seats expandable to 100,000, including 260 luxury suites and 13,000 premium seats, it sits on a privately funded development that is three times the size of Disneyland and twice the size of the Vatican City. It's bang in the middle of the long-derided Inglewood neighbourhood and is sparking gentrification – something Ratcliffe wants around Old Trafford.

Manchester United have also visited Real Madrid's redeveloped Bernabeu this year, as well as following Chicago Bears' Burnham Park project and their plans to use a stadium as a catalyst for regeneration. The new stadiums have vast screens and make Old Trafford look cramped, but what of their soul?

Change is in the air, but fans will hope that a beer won't cost £14, nor that £80 will be required to park your car, as it is at the SoFi. While Premier League football is increasingly popular in the US, and long-time fans can now watch every match at home, the exact demand to see Europe's biggest club is not always easy to measure precisely.

Clockwise from below left "It'd be Ruud not to"; Ratcliffe (left) has recruited Brailsford (right) to help Ten Hag (centre); eleven brave souls run the pre-season injury gauntlet; SoFi, so good

Tickets to see Manchester United against Arsenal are subjected to dynamic pricing – that is, they go up and down according to demand – and those behind the goal halved in price from $240 in the 24 hours before the game. That's a well that top clubs keep drinking from. The attendance is an impressive 62,486 – just 10,000 short of the crowd that watched the 2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup Final – and includes Arsenal fan Justin Bieber as well as singer Niall Horan, who plays at the adjacent LA forum after the match. Bieber tries to stay incognito in a suite but gets recognised; fans lower shirts from the seats above for him to sign.

One person who doesn't try to look anonymous comes in a blue Manchester City shirt, but the American crowd lacks the aggression and naked tribalism of an English equivalent. People barely notice.

It isn't just the main SoFi stadium that's on the new regime's radar. Manchester United's new CEO, Omar Berrada (previously at Manchester City), new chief communications officer Toby Craig (previously at Manchester City and Chelsea) and chief operating officer Collette Roche visit the newly opened Cosm adjacent to the SoFi before the Arsenal game. Smaller and less famous than Las Vegas' Sphere, Cosm is an immersive space holding 2,000 people and has a giant screen offering 'shared reality'. If Manchester United are building anew, it's not a stretch to say that a Cosm-type venue at Old Trafford would work. Fans could watch games there, surrounded by the action. There's also a 6,000-capacity YouTube theatre.

After LA, United make the short flight down the Pacific coast to San Diego, to face Real Betis in a far-from-sold-out Snapdragon Stadium. Snapdragon technology powers cars, VR glasses, phones and PCs; it's owned by Qualcomm Technologies, who have their headquarters in San Diego. Snapdragon have recently become Manchester United's shirt sponsors and are delighted at their raised profile. They became the first company to state that they would be interested in putting their name to any new Old Trafford. All of that happens while the team are in the US.

STRAIGHT INTO COMPTON

The team rush back to the airport following their 3-2 victory over Betis. They must be in the air by an 11.30pm curfew, or return to LA by coach. They make it. The next morning, club officials, Ten Hag and players attend a breakfast put on by the British American Business Council of LA, along with the UK ▸

Consulate office in LA. Attendees hear that the UK is now the single largest foreign investor in the state of California. They are told how Manchester United approach commercial deals and always look to strike a balance for what is best economically for the club, while also being aware of the club's overall brand, ethos and the place it occupies in world sport.

Much is said about the vast opportunities that the US presents. It's the largest most professionalised sports market in the world, and from a football, Manchester United and Premier League point of view, they see nothing but continued growth. NBC, the current Premier League rights holders in the US, was referenced multiple times as a good partner to help all parties.

They also discussed how the club wants to maintain a healthy presence in markets such as the US by not only visiting on pre-season tours and taking the advance fees paid by a promoter, but by working with local supporters' clubs to maintain a presence all year round, as they look to support and grow the fanbase. To do that, the club hold Love United events in cities as diverse as LA or Mumbai, sending legendary former players to meet and greet fans and watch a game together. Liverpool do similar.

Andy Cole, Denis Irwin and Wes Brown travel with the team, as does Bryan Robson, who is spotted in conversation with Ten Hag. "We agreed on our favourite two restaurants in Hale, where we both live, before we spoke about football," Robson tells *FFT*. The FA Cup trophy has been brought along, too, as the legends glad-hand fans and sponsors, hold question-and-answer sessions, and visit those less privileged as part of their community outreach.

Manchester United go to the hard-bitten Compton to meet the Compton Cowboys, a crew who work with horses to provide a positive influence on inner-city youth, combat negative and historically inaccurate narratives surrounding the area, and pay homage to Black Americans in Western and equine heritage. Kids are taught to ride and keep horses. It's smart.

But Manchester United are also better now at knowing the few fans who have travelled from the UK to support the team. Those supporters are informed of training sessions they can attend. The players – or, at least, those doing media rather than remaining silent because their Manchester United futures are in doubt – stay on message.

"The tour has been really good – it's always good to come to the USA, train and see our fans," Maguire tells *FFT*. "You see just how big the club is when you come to places like this, and the worldwide support that we have."

Maguire also speaks of his own situation, having missed Euro 2024 due to injury. "The last couple of months have been a real disappointment for me – one of the toughest moments of my career to date," he says. "I'm just happy to be back to play my first game in three months. I got into a good place mentally and physically last season with my form, but then my body broke down on me."

Every player has their own story and their own hopes for the season ahead. As well as Yoro, United have added 23-year-old Dutch forward Joshua Zirkzee to their ranks.

"Everyone is optimistic in pre-season and at United, you hope that with all of the changes, something positive comes from them," Evans says. "It was unfortunate with Leny that he got an injury straight away, but everyone is looking forward to see how Joshua gets on, how he integrates into the team and adapts, because the schedule gets busy pretty quickly."

> "EVERYONE'S LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING HOW JOSHUA ZIRKZEE ADAPTS, BECAUSE THE SCHEDULE GETS BUSY PRETTY QUICKLY"





Below Nag herds with attitude **Bottom** Zirkzee is the latest addition to United's attack

The Red Devils touch down in Manchester with just five days of training before taking on their City rivals in the Community Shield. This is a new Manchester United, yet it's difficult to assess from the tour how good the new Manchester United are, without being swayed by that natural pre-season optimism that Evans talks of.

There were bright points. Mason Mount is playing again, though the feeling within the club is that he still needs to assist or score more. Sancho is back in the fold, for now. Rashford looked focused in America and the tour was positive for young players including Toby Collyer and 17-year-old Harry Amass.

Manchester United feel that Yoro and Zirkzee are young, exciting, developing talents who will replace older players on higher wages, in Raphael Varane and Anthony Martial. That's the direction in which the club want to take their squad. Ten Hag was integral to both signings, though he is fine with working with Ashworth, Wilcox and other new people around him. It's not as if Manchester United's recruitment has worked especially well over the past decade.

Ratcliffe asked for patience from fans; there's little of that from online supporters of the super-clubs, who tend to expect instant gratification, yet the decision-makers, led by INEOS, enjoy a fair wind because they're not the Glazers, because Ratcliffe is putting money into infrastructure and players rather than taking it out, and because he has been hugely successful in business. There's faith in the Mancunian from most that he wants to make a real difference and return the club to glory. If not, why is he bothering?

Manchester United's star has dimmed and eighth-placed finishes are not acceptable, but just as Liverpool played in front of 90,000 spectators in Melbourne a decade ago having finished seventh, so the Red Devils retain vast worldwide appeal. And if the resurgence takes longer than fans hope, at least Manchester United beat Liverpool in the race back to the airport in South Carolina.



"CIGARETTES AFTER SEX,"

says Gary Lineker with a schoolboy's mischief, to a room full of people at London Bridge.

FourFourTwo have ventured into the capital to see England's fourth-highest goalscorer and Alan Shearer (joint-seventh) at a Spotify Supper gig, and Lineker has just been asked on stage what represents his guilty pleasure, in a musical context at least. An American dream pop band is his answer.

Asked the very same question, Shearer responds a little more conventionally. "Lionel Richie," he says. If Lionel wrote songs about creosoting fences, no ceiling – for dancing or otherwise – would have been safe.

Lineker and Shearer have known each other for a long time. Thirty-one years ago they were England team-mates, both finding the net on the night Shearer made his debut for the Three Lions at home to France. Several months later, Lineker's glorious international career came to an end after an infamous penalty miss against Brazil, then a miserable group-stage exit for Graham Taylor's men at Euro 92. That proved the deadly duo's only tournament together.

Nearly 10 years Lineker's junior, Shearer would follow his future BBC colleague as the nation's leading man and captain, before joining him in front of the cameras in 2006. The firm friends are now starring in a new podcast together, called *The Rest Is Football*, alongside another *Match of the Day* regular in Micah Richards.

Once their on-stage Q&A has concluded, the two England striking legends sidle over to *FFT*, ready to recount their best moments from three decades as pals...

FFT: You've worked together at the BBC for 17 years, and known each other for even longer. What's your favourite memory?
SHEARER: The first time we came across each other was playing on opposite teams, Southampton vs Tottenham. The first time we got together would have been February 1992, for my England debut against France.
LINEKER: We both scored!
AS: Yeah, that has to be a favourite. I was after his position – he was coming to the end of his England career and I was just starting out. For us to play together and score on the same night was pretty special.

FFT: Do you have a favourite moment from Alan's career, Gary?
GL: His performances at Euro 96, particularly the mishit, the slice against Holland! [*Laughs*] He was outstanding at that tournament and that grasped the country, didn't it? Amazing.

Below Shearer's famous 'mishit' to sink the Dutch
Bottom Both of them scored on Al's international debut in 1992





FFT: During your time in TV, is there one particular trip together that stands out?
AS: We've been very spoiled, haven't we? We spent a month in Rio, a month in Cape Town, Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, Qatar.
GL: The trips are wonderful, especially when the tournament starts to break up into the quarter-finals, because then you get gaps and the fun nights out. It's not the same as being a player, although it is in terms of the amount of time you're away, so you need to try to have some fun.

FFT: Have you ever rowed?
AS: I don't think we've fallen out, have we?
GL: No, we're pals. I wouldn't have asked him on to the podcast if I don't get on with him! [*Both laugh*]

FFT: Has there been a favourite match?
AS: It has to be last year's World Cup final.
GL: That was unbelievable – the extra time of that was the most exhilarating, nuts 30 minutes of football I've ever seen.

FFT: What about a best tournament?
GL: The World Cups are special. It's always better when the host nation does well, and England of course. In 2018, that made the tournament – it was fun being in Moscow. It wouldn't be now, I'd imagine, but it was then and there were some really brilliant games in that tournament. England went so close, though obviously it ended up as it always bloody does, in heartache.
AS: We had a good night in Russia, in the bar, didn't we? After an England victory, believe it or not. That was one of our nights when we were able to...
GL: I think someone videoed it and it went viral. You singing!
AS: Yeah, I started singing.
GL: With the breadsticks as a microphone.
AS: The breadsticks! [*Laughs*] That was an incredible night.

FFT: Could you two have worked as a long-term strike partnership?
GL: We've got a good success rate...
AS: There weren't many games, were there?
GL: No, we only had a couple together, and not a whole game. We were similar kinds of forwards. I played on the shoulder and Alan was more... you know, good players can...
AS: Find a way.
GL: Yeah, you find a way – even though we played in the same position, we played it in different ways. So I think we'd have probably complemented each other.
AS: We went about it in different ways, but we were looking for one thing – we always wanted to get into that same space and put the ball in the back of the net. That's what all good goalscorers do. Never be afraid to miss. You're going to miss – it's inevitable.
GL: I'd say Alan scored a lot more long-range goals. I hardly scored from outside the box – I was more of a six-yard box player. He was more physical than me, whereas I was faster. I used to love playing on the shoulder of the defenders and spinning past them. Many of my goals were one-on-ones.



FFT: Which off-air memories stand out?
GL: We've never slept together! [*Both laugh*]
AS: You always get more animated during the live games, especially when you're in the stadium. He was going mad when Leicester won the FA Cup, getting all emotional, which was understandable.
GL: You'll get that feeling one day, Alan.
AS: When Newcastle win something, yeah...

FFT: How do you reflect on the prank that involved pornography noises being played when you were live on air at Wolves vs Liverpool last season?
GL: [*Laughs*] I was interviewing Alan when it was actually going on.
AS: Yeah, I was on the co-comms, so I was inside the stadium. I could hear it, and there was a part of me thinking it was my phone...
GL: It's the porn he was listening to the night before! [*Both laugh*]
AS: I'd been tricked by people sending me that video so many times, and I'm thinking, 'Has it gone off on my phone, in my pocket?' I tried to be professional and ignore it – I only started laughing when you started laughing!

FFT: Alan, would you ever have appeared on television in your underwear, like Gary?
GL: I think he was slightly aroused...
AS: [*Laughs*] I would never. I couldn't believe he did it. He was absolutely petrified, working out all summer, that's for sure. I wouldn't be so stupid as to say it in the first place.
GL: There was no way Leicester were going to win the league, though, was there?
AS: There's always something in football that will bite you one day, for whatever you say. And it did then. In a good way, I suppose.
GL: It was fun.

FFT: How does Micah Richards change the dynamic between you?
AS: Micah brings his own energy. He's a great character and a great lad anyway. You have to get on well – there's nothing fake about it, we all like each other and like a laugh. It's very authentic.
GL: From my experience of podcasts, it's the chemistry between the hosts that makes something successful. We knew we had that chemistry from the podcast we did previously, for *Match of the Day Top 10*, and also from working together. We've got totally different characters. Obviously I lead it, because I'm a presenter. Alan's kind of the grumpy old man and Micah's the youthful, exuberant, completely bonkers one! There's a nice mix.
AS: I think it's important that you're allowed to take the piss out of each other.
GL: Yeah, people like that. That 'banter' side of football is quite important. It does exist, all the time, and you never stop doing that. You're footballers – that's how it is in the dressing room and it gets taken on into TV.

"I WAS EAGER TO NICK GARY'S POSITION AS ENGLAND'S MAIN CENTRE-FORWARD AND CAPTAIN"









Top to bottom
"We can tell it's you doing those noises... Danny Murphy"; inside the *MOTD* nerve centre; Shearer nets at France 98

FFT: Who gets stopped most for selfies and autographs these days?
GL: There's not much in it.
AS: That comes with working on the BBC, doesn't it? There's a whole new era now who have come in and started watching football 10 or 15 years ago, since we retired. There'll be a lot of people who recognise us from the TV rather than being footballers.
GL: Spring chickens!

FFT: Alan, what do you remember of being a young striker in the England squad when Gary was a senior player. Did he help you?
GL: Absolutely not! [*Both laugh*]
AS: He knew that I was after his position...
GL: I'd already announced my retirement.
AS: Yeah, he had. I made my England debut in February, then Gary retired that summer.
GL: I saw there was a new kid on the block, so I knew to get out before I got usurped!
AS: We only had about three or four months together, including the disastrous Euro 92. I'd played against him, so I knew he scored goals. Him and Ian Rush were the two main centre-forwards, banging in goals every week. They were the top guys that I wanted to be as good as.

FFT: Did a rivalry exist between you?
AS: Not really.
GL: We didn't overlap enough.
AS: No, it may have been different if we were both at the same age, but I was just starting ▸





with England, and four or five months later he was finishing.
GL: When you talk about helping younger players, it doesn't really work like that, does it? Certainly not with people that play in your position! [*Laughs*]
AS: Especially centre-forwards. They're such selfish so-and-sos.
GL: But you're always friendly, and I was the captain at the time as well. You don't go and say, "I want to help you," although if anyone ever comes up to you and asks for advice, you give it. It actually rarely happens in football, which I find strange.
AS: I looked up to him because of his career – that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to nick his position with the national team and take over as the country's leading centre-forward, which he was. I also wanted to be captain of England, which he was.

FFT: Describe what Euro 92 was like for you both.
GL: Results weren't very good. That's probably one of the weakest England sides. Going into the tournament, Graham Taylor had come in, elbowed out Chris Waddle and Bryan Robson, then Paul Gascoigne and John Barnes got injured. The flair players weren't there, so we had a very workmanlike, dogged team, but without much quality in it. Two years earlier, we were a really good side at Italia 90, but it was a transitional phase. We still could have done something, though – Denmark [late replacements for war-torn Yugoslavia] won it and they didn't even qualify – but it wasn't my favourite tournament.
AS: I was just desperate to make the squad and be among the big boys, which was my dream. What happened wasn't irrelevant – it was disappointing, but for me it was more about getting into my first squad and trying to make an impression.

"I LOVED BEARDSLEY. HE WAS CREATIVE, HE WAS UNSELFISH AND DIDN'T CLUTTER THE BOX"

Above Lineker and Beardsley were a potent England pair **Below** "Lovely view... can we go down now"

FFT: One of you regularly played for the Three Lions alongside Peter Beardsley, the other with Teddy Sheringham. Who had the better strike partner?
GL: Good question.
AS: [*Exhales*] I played with both.
GL: I loved Peter. Teddy was a great player, but I'd be biased because of my relationship with Peter. I was pretty much a goal a game, playing with Beardsley. He was very different to Teddy. Peter was so busy – he could beat people, whereas Teddy dropped deeper and brought others into the game. What I really loved about Peter Beardsley was that a) he was creative, b) he was unselfish and c) he didn't particularly like getting in the box that often. I know people always say you need a load of bodies inside the penalty area, but if you're a striker the one thing you want is space, and the fewer people there are, the more space there is. That suited me down to the ground, because I played with so many strikers who'd stand in the exact spot where you wanted to run – they'd go there too early or clutter it up. Beardsley never did that, he liked to stay around the edge of the penalty box. That's one of the reasons I scored more goals when I was with him.
AS: I played alongside Peter at Newcastle and Teddy for England – they were both superb. It was just how intelligent Teddy was, how he understood space and where you were going to run. His positioning and unselfishness were great for a goalscorer.

FFT: Which one of you was more effective at taking penalties?
AS: My penalties were better than his last one for England! [*Both laugh*]
GL: That's true! We've got similar goalscoring records from penalties, a similar ratio. When one goes in, it doesn't really matter how. You could whip one in the top corner.
AS: When they really matter, in an important situation, we were both half decent at that.

FFT: Alan became a manager at Newcastle. Did the dugout tempt you, Gary?
GL: No, never. We talked about it this week, funnily enough – he took the piss out of me. Doug Ellis did call me about going to Aston Villa, but Shearer was trying to make out that it was just some villa abroad! Leicester asked me once as well, but I was never interested in being a manager.

FFT: Has there ever been a chance you'd go back into management, Alan?
AS: I had a few rounds of talks with Cardiff, but for various reasons it never happened.

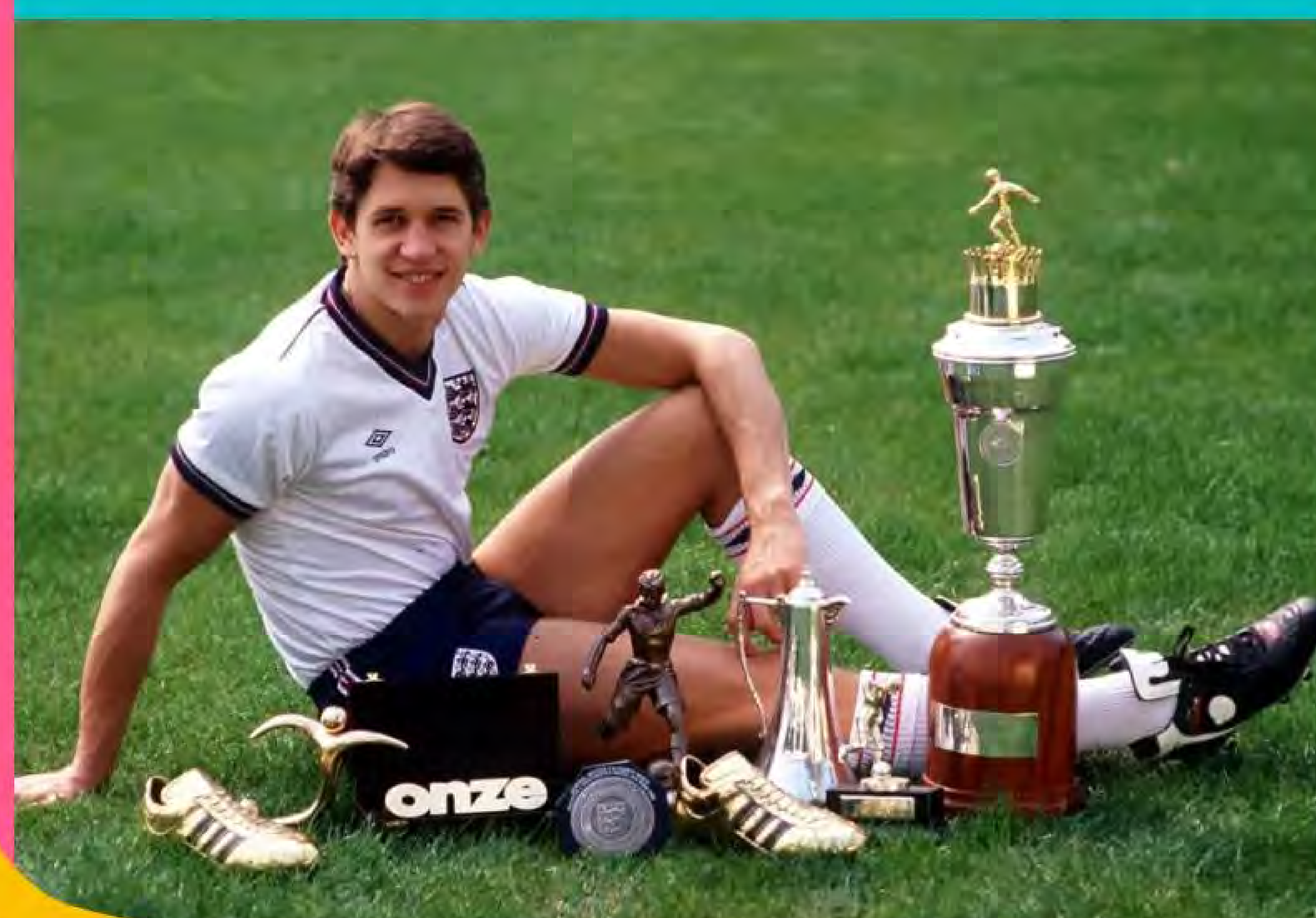
FFT: How much do you remember of Gary starring for England at Italia 90?
AS: I was away with my family and friends in Portugal, watching every game in bars. I was thinking, 'I want that to be me one day'.

FFT: Gary, how did you feel watching Alan win the Golden Boot at Euro 96?
GL: It's totally different when you've finished playing, particularly with England. When he was doing his stuff at Euro 96, I was working









on TV. I wasn't the main presenter, that was Des Lynam, but I was doing the highlights shows. That meant I went to all the England games, and to be in the ground was amazing. You'd been through quite a bad patch before that, hadn't you?
AS: I hadn't scored for England for two years.
GL: Then he came in and smashed it. You just want the team to do well. When you're still playing and there's another guy ahead of you in the pecking order, you don't want them to do well at all because you want to play, but it's completely different once you've retired.

FFT: Alan then became the world's most expensive footballer, joining Newcastle for £15 million. Despite the pressure that came with that, he continued to thrive...
GL: Pressure's for?
AS: Tyres!
GL: [*Laughs*] Exactly. He scored a shedload of goals. When he first got into the England squad, I saw a player. You can tell, you can always tell. We were similar on that front – we thrived on the big occasion. The bigger the atmosphere, the bigger the pressure, the more enjoyable it is.

Clockwise from top No silverware can match being a Magpies hero; trophies, Lineker won a few; "I bet Gary would enjoy a go on this one"

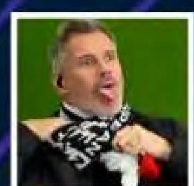
FFT: Gary played overseas with Barcelona. Did you ever want to do that too, Alan?
AS: It was never a serious opportunity. There were always little rumours and talks that had gone on in a small way, but there was never anything concrete, or for me to go and make that happen. I never pushed it. I was always content in the places I was at, so it was never something I seriously considered. If I could go back – only because I had the experience of representing my hometown team, and of winning the Premier League with Blackburn – then yes, I'd maybe think, 'I'd like to go and sample that culture'.

FFT: It's often said that Alan should have signed for Manchester United instead of Newcastle in 1996. Should he have, Gary?
GL: No, because he didn't want to. He wanted to play for Newcastle. You could suggest he would have won more things, but you've also got the huge pleasure of playing and breaking records for your hometown club.

FFT: What one thing would you swap from each other's careers?
GL: I'd take his Premier League title and he'd take my FA Cup.
AS: I'd certainly have an FA Cup... [*Both laugh*] With Newcastle. But I'm more than content with how my career panned out. It wasn't for the want of trying that I didn't win more – if you have regrets then it would perhaps be for not trying, but I don't think you can ever put that to either of us.
GL: If you'd told me when I was 18 that I'd go on to play 80 games for my country, score 48 goals, win Golden Boots, play at the World Cup and in the old First Division, and sign for Barcelona... I'd have said that you're utterly insane! [*Laughs*] I could never have qualms.
AS: Lifting the FA Cup once would have been really nice, because it wasn't a good feeling leaving Wembley on three separate occasions with nothing – two finals [1998 and '99] and one semi-final [2000]. As they say, Wembley's only a place for winners.
GL: He was twice a runner-up in the FA Cup, while I finished second in the league three times. I'd love to have won the league title somewhere, obviously. But do I lose any sleep about it? No.

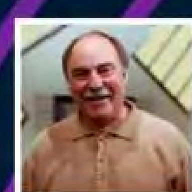
FFT: What about being an icon for one club, like Alan is at Newcastle?
GL: Are you insinuating I'm not? [*Both laugh*] I mean, of course he is. I left Leicester to go and do other things, but I think I'm relatively liked at Leicester. I haven't got a statue yet, though.
AS: You're doing alright!

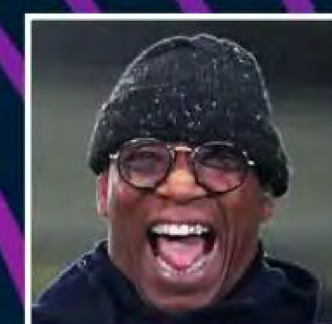











30 GREATEST PUNDITS EVER

FFT rates the finest opinion-offerers in the history of UK television, via Del Boy, *Space Jam* and Donald Trump...

Words Tom Hancock













Top left "This hat? At times, it's world-class"

30 ROBBIE SAVAGE

A pantomime villain as a player, Savage has continued that combative but comical style as a pundit. As well as running Macclesfield FC, he's spent most of the past few years bickering with Chris Sutton on BT/TNT, plus BBC Radio 5 Live phone-in *606*. If you like petty point-scoring, they're the duo for you. **HE SAID** "At times, I'll be honest with you, I was world-class" – a modest assessment from Sav, to the BT panel's bemusement...

29 SLAVEN BILIC

The widely renowned guitar player/football manager has been a popular figure on ITV during major tournaments, able to regale tales from his time as Croatia boss – Steve McClaren must be glad of the reminder. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Dancing on top of a table after a Euro 2016 goal by Dimitri Payet, then playing for his West Ham. Would have danced less had he known Payet would then spend six months agitating to leave...

28 JURGEN KLINSMANN

Klinsi isn't massively popular with fans of USA or South Korea, but he is a contender for the most popular German in Britain (sorry, Jurgen Klopp, Boris Becker and Henning Wehn) thanks to spells at Spurs and jovial appearances on the BBC at tournaments. He knows a thing or two about them, having won both the World Cup and the Euros. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Writing the BBC's newsletter during the World Cup, obviously.

27 JOE COLE

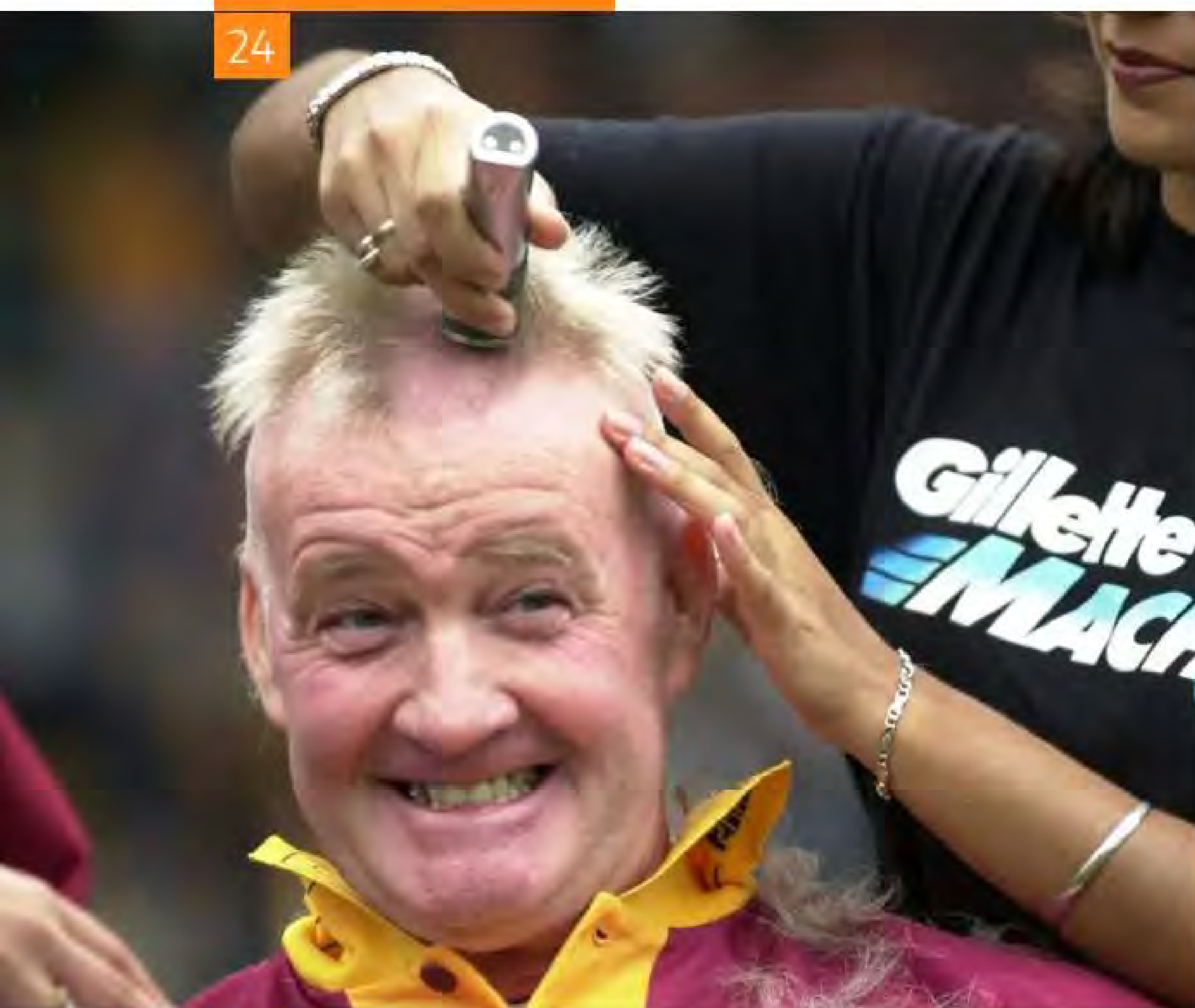
Among the most gifted English footballers of his generation, Cole has the gift of the gab, too – not only is he a regular on TNT, but he'll also turn up pitchside at any England match, look for a camera and start nattering away, whether Channel 4 have the rights or not. **STYLE** Known to sport a flat cap and a rather Del Boy-esque coat, as if he's arrived for duty halfway between a shift at Peckham market and an audition for *Peaky Blinders*. Cushty.

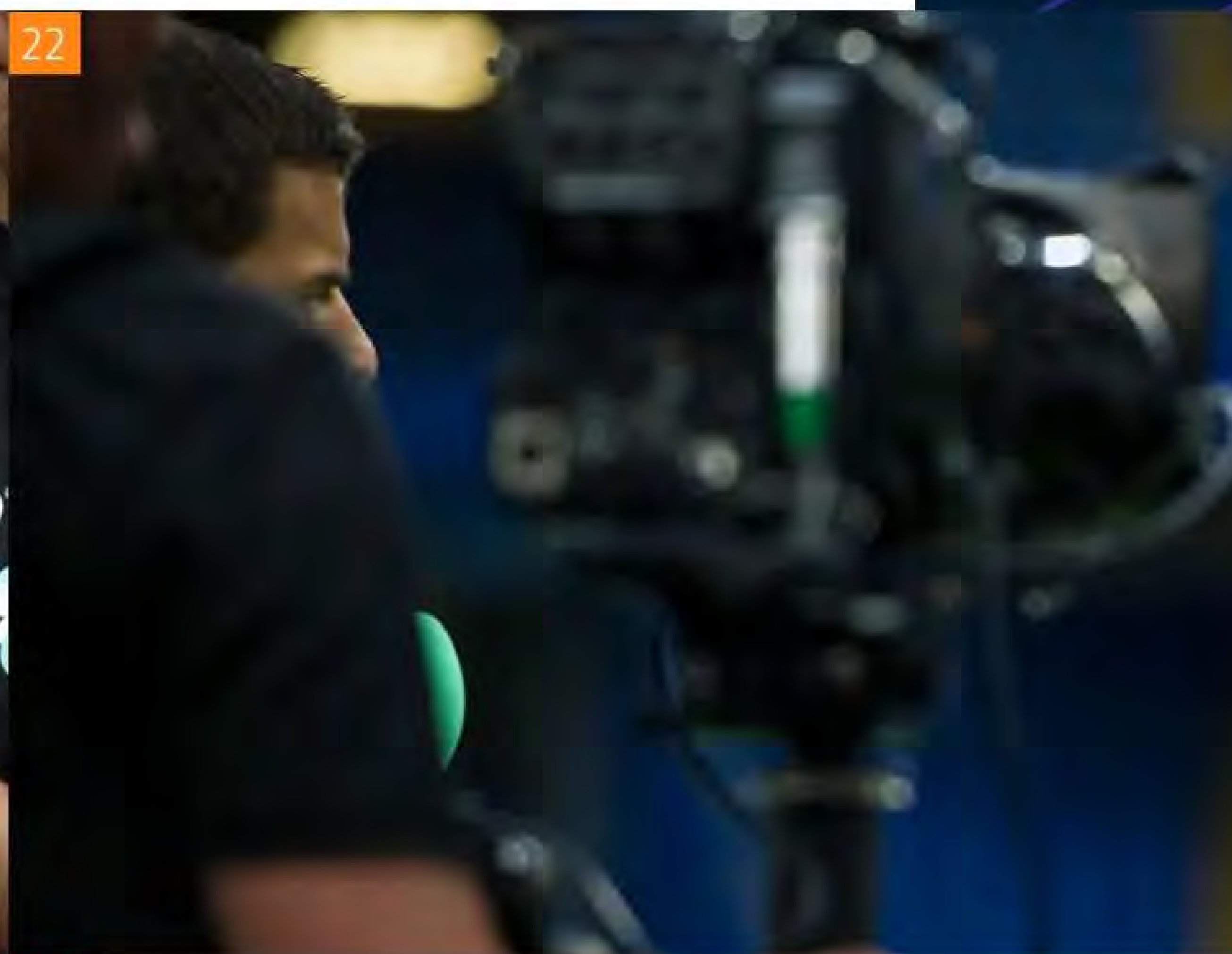
26 CHRIS SUTTON

Off the radar after retirement, he thundered back, turning up everywhere and anywhere, from the BBC to BT, either side of the border. A mixture of his dry sense of humour and his monumental superiority complex make him a highly annoying or highly entertaining debater, depending on your point of view. **HE SAID** Caused ripples in 2015 by saying that Celtic could beat Rangers "blindfolded". Come on, Chris, you're better than that...

25 GLENN HODDLE

One of England's finest players of the 1980s, Hoddle has also proved skilful as a pundit – a more successful venture than his stint as a contestant on *The Masked Singer*. Always curious about tactical innovations, when an ex-England boss talks, it's worth listening. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Going absolutely mental celebrating Spurs' 2019 Champions League win over Ajax – just months after he'd had a heart attack. Calm it down, Glenn...















24 RODNEY MARSH

The QPR great was the joker in the pack of the *Soccer Saturday* line-up for more than a decade, until he departed following an ill-advised remark about the 2004 tsunami. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Making a bet with Bradford fans that he'd shave his head if they survived Premier League relegation in 2000 – they did, so he obliged, on the Valley Parade pitch, while a masked man stood beside him wielding an axe. No idea why.

23 MICAH RICHARDS

Richards burst on to the scene as a player with Manchester City and England – things faded after that, but he's loved his second career as a pundit, livening up every studio with a frenzy of giggles and annoying Roy Keane at any given opportunity. Brave man... **HE SAID** "What is this nonsense?" – Micah's reaction to Keane bringing a packed lunch along to the Sky Sports studio. We presume that the sandwiches didn't contain prawn.

22 ALAN SHEARER

The BBC's foremost pundit of the modern era, Shearer took some time to warm up in the early days – his interviews were often cautious as a player, too – but he's lightened up significantly as time has gone on. A real legend whose opinions carry serious weight. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Trying to keep a straight face when a prankster played sex noises live on air. "There was a part of me thinking it was my phone..." he later told *FFT*.

21 JACK CHARLTON

When Charlton joined ITV's 1974 World Cup coverage, punditry was in its infancy – he helped to make it what it became, offering real charisma to his role as an analyst. The no-nonsense World Cup winner had a long and distinguished career in broadcasting, while also managing the Republic of Ireland. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Forecasting with perfection how Nottingham Forest would sink Hamburg in the 1980 European Cup Final.

Top left "Stay still, Rodney, or we deploy the random bloke with the axe"

20 PAUL MERSON

An enduring presence in the *Soccer Saturday* studio, Merson is one of the most likeable pundits around. Sometimes astute, but his unfailing ability to mispronounce players' names provides plenty of chuckles – he has turned being a bit of a wally into an art form. **HE SAID** "I could win the league title with Olympiakos, they've won it 107 times and it's only been going 106 years" – Merson when Marco Silva was appointed Hull boss.

19 RIO FERDINAND

The former Manchester United defender has carved out a decent media career since hanging up his boots back in 2015, setting up his own FIVE YouTube channel, as well as being a voice of real authority on TNT Sports. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Turning down a request to sign a Liverpool supporter's shirt while working on the Reds' match against Fulham in 2022. "Are you crazy? I can't sign that!" Old north west rivalries die hard...













18 MARTIN O'NEILL

A fine addition at tournaments – gave the impression of a kindly uncle who didn't quite know where he was, but razor sharp when challenged, cutting people down ruthlessly. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Before reminding Patrick Vieira and Fabio Cannavaro that he'd won two European Cups to their none, he declared that Robbie Williams couldn't play an instrument or write any songs... while sat next to the singer, live on the BBC. Brutal.

17 EMMA HAYES

After 12 years as Chelsea boss, the new USA manager is one of the women's game's very best coaches – she's impressed as a pundit, too, at both male and female tournaments. **STYLE** While others turn up and ask "So, what game are we doing today?", Hayes has spent the past seven weeks preparing. Full Marcelo Bielsa deep-dive analysis, only just stopping short of sending someone over to the training ground armed with bolt cutters.

Top left "And don't get me started on Gary Barlow, either..."

16 DEREK DOUGAN

One of the earliest UK TV pundits, the fiery Northern Irishman was in the middle of his long Wolves career when he joined ITV's team for the 1970 World Cup. He returned to the channel four years later in a combative all-star line-up alongside Jack Charlton and Brian Clough – like putting a bunch of tigers in a room and just letting them have at it. **THEY SAID** "Dougan gave football punditry a fresh intoxicating sparkle" – Brian Moore.

15 THIERRY HENRY

In his pomp, Henry was pretty much the coolest player on the planet – so of course he's a seriously cool pundit, too. As well as his work with CBS in the United States, he has been a standout analyst for Sky Sports, including stints on *Monday Night Football*. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Reacting to the news of Brendan Rodgers' sacking as the gaffer of Liverpool by placing his hand on Jamie Carragher's thigh, live on air. Ooh err...

14 MARK LAWRENSON

The BBC's coverage just wouldn't have been the same for fully 30 years without Lawro's unmistakable brand of cynicism. Whatever was happening on the field, he wanted us to know he wasn't impressed. Once you threw in the dad jokes, it was almost endearing. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Allowing Bolton fans to shave off his 'tache after wrongly tipping them to go down. Realising he looked better without it, he never grew it back again.

13 IAN ST JOHN

One half of football's most iconic TV double act, Saint and Greavsie, St John was the straight man of the duo, like Ernie Wise to Eric Morecambe. Previously a First Division winner with Liverpool, the Scot even had his own puppet on satirical show *Spitting Image*. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Hosting the draw for the fifth round of the Rumbelows Cup in 1992 – away teams drawn by Greaves, home teams by... er, Donald Trump?! Yes, really.

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Top left Souey: defender of cats

12 GRAEME SOUNESS

Among the hardest midfielders of the 1970s and '80s, he never pulled any punches as a pundit either. Outspoken during 15 years on Sky, he wasn't Paul Pogba's biggest fan. "I don't even know who Graeme Souness is," insisted Pogba, presumably while shielding his Souey dartboard from the camera.
HE SAID "For me, looking at that video, that cat hadn't done anything wrong" – Souness earnestly assesses the Kurt Zouma saga.

11 JAMIE CARRAGHER

Since retiring, Carra has gained a reputation as one of the very best pundits covering the Premier League – as well as his work for CBS, he's a firm fixture on *Monday Night Football* alongside old sparring partner Gary Neville.
HE SAID "I think I'd have probably won one if Liverpool were owned by a nation state" – responding to Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola's quip that he never lifted the Premier League title in his playing career.

10 ANDY GRAY

Not just a co-commentator but the studio pundit who popularised *Monday Night Football*, taking football analysis to arguably deeper levels than ever before, touchscreen technology and all. Smashing it as a pundit, then the Sian Massey incident happened and it all went wrong, for him and Richard Keys.
HE SAID "Can you believe that? A female linesman. They don't know the offside rule" – his controversial comments about Massey.

09 ALAN HANSEN

Fans of a certain age won't be able to read the word 'diabolical' without hearing it in Hansen's dry Scottish accent. That was his adjective of choice when describing poor defending – his bluntness helped to make him one of *Match of the Day*'s great pundits.
HE SAID "You can't win anything with kids" – Hansen's verdict on a fledgling Manchester United team back in 1995. Fergie had other ideas: months later, they were champions.

08 ALLY McCOIST

We challenge you to find anyone who loves football as much as McCoist. The smily Scot lives for the beautiful game, and any match featuring his presence is all the better for it. Thoroughly knowledgeable, the ex-Rangers striker is adored as a co-commentator and has always excelled as a pundit, particularly north of the border, for BT Sport and others.
HE SAID "It's a pleasure to be here today, it really is" – we believe you, Ally, we really do.

07 MALCOLM ALLISON

One of the most exuberant characters in the game, Big Mal didn't abandon his no-filter style in front of the TV cameras. The former Manchester City manager – easily spottable by his trademark fedora – did some of his best work on ITV's coverage of Mexico 1970.
MOST NOTABLE MOMENT Heavily criticising Alan Mullery during the tournament, then doubling down in a heated debate with the player on TV months later. Pure box office.


06



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01

06 GARY NEVILLE

Known as Manchester United's dressing room shop steward during his 19 years in the first team, Red Nev has never been afraid to say what he thinks – hence why he was perfect for punditry from the start. Most of the time on Sky Sports, he talks complete sense, too. **HE SAID** "It's like having a choice between two blokes who've nicked your wife" – Neville gives his thoughts on a Premier League title duel between Manchester City and Liverpool.

05 JIMMY GREAVES

The latter half of Saint and Greavsie was maybe the best goalscorer in English history, then won TV viewers' hearts. Both witty and moustachioed – an irresistible combination severely lacking among today's pundits. **HE SAID** "I haven't seen a boardroom like this since I was in Doug Ellis' at Aston Villa" – to Donald Trump, at Trump Tower, during the Rumbelows Cup draw. The joke went straight over Trump's quiff, but Don laughed anyway.

Bottom right "So me, Cruyff and Elton John talk about it, then we decide that I was right"

04 IAN WRIGHT

Adored by Arsenal fans as a player and by the entire English public as a pundit, Wright lights up the studio, whatever he's covering – *Match of the Day*, men's tournaments, women's tournaments, he's consistently excellent value and ready to have a laugh. **HE SAID** "I just can't stop thinking about the film *Space Jam*, it's like the Monstars nicked their talent" – Wright's post-match verdict on England's Euro 2016 defeat to Iceland.

03 JIMMY HILL

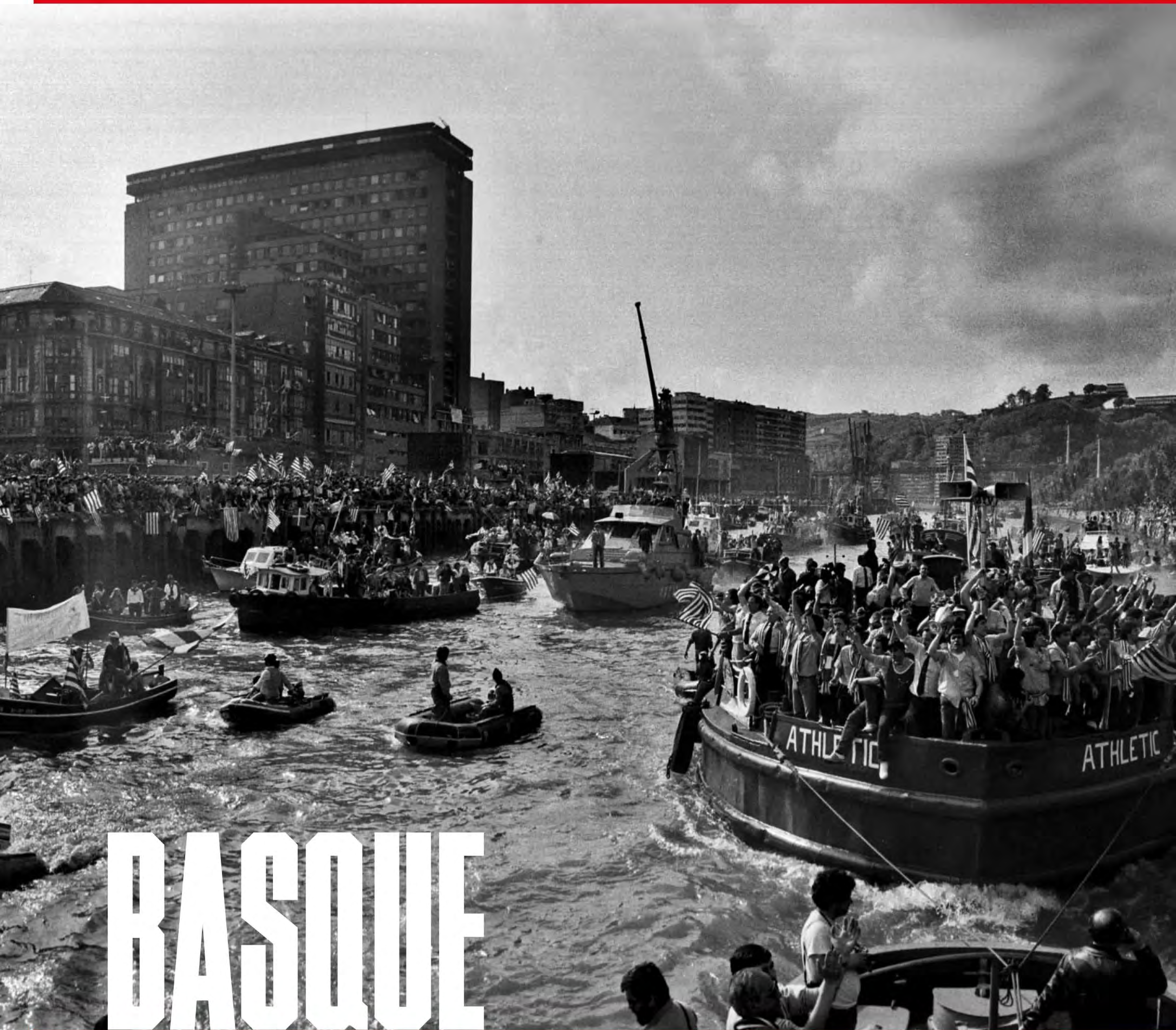
Was there anything Hill couldn't do? Player, manager, chairman, inventor, TV presenter... and pundit. The man with football's finest chin devised the idea that ITV use a punditry panel at the 1970 World Cup – it had never been done. Then he starred as one himself. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Proudly wearing a St George's Cross bow tie for England's Euro 96 semi-final against Germany. Did it bring them good luck? Er, no, it did not...

02 ROY KEANE

Keane took no prisoners on the pitch, and doesn't in the TV studio either. It's not just his words either, but the almost hammed-up looks of pure horror and outrage he gives his fellow pundits – usually Micah Richards, to be honest. He's compelling viewing, but he won't want any praise for it – that's his job. **HE SAID** "Never again, I'd rather go to the dentist" – Keane's verdict after his first go at punditry. Thankfully he changed his mind.

01 BRIAN CLOUGH

We wouldn't say Clough was the best pundit of all time, but he was in the top one. When he spoke, you listened – only the bravest, like Muhammad Ali, disagreed: "I heard that he talks too much – Clough, I've had enough!" **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Calling Pole Jan Tomaszewski "a circus clown in gloves" – the goalkeeper then played a blinder, denying England a place at the 1974 World Cup. Clough probably still thought he was right...



BASQUE IN THE GLORY

Four decades ago, Athletic Club took the fight for Spanish supremacy to Real Madrid and Barcelona. Showing spirit and skill, the Bilbao boys won La Liga... and then defended it, too

Words Leo Moynihan



Above A trophy parade to top all trophy parades

Like so many love affairs, it started with a dance. Like rather fewer love affairs, it finished with a mass brawl.

From the spring of 1982, when the England national side visited Athletic Club in Bilbao and were welcomed by a traditional Basque jig called an *aurresku*, to the spring of '84, when the Copa del Rey final between Athletic and Barcelona ended in a punch-up that belonged in a western, the people of Bilbao were given a football team they still passionately adore today. This was a team its supporters could believe in, fanatically cheer and ultimately cherish forever; a team that would rise up and take on Spain's best.

It wouldn't be easy, it wouldn't always be pretty and occasionally it even turned violent, but take them on they bloody well did.

INSPIRED BY SIR BOBBY

On March 23, 1982, Ron Greenwood's Three Lions travelled to Bilbao. His side would soon be playing their opening World Cup games in the Spanish city, and Athletic's testimonial for long-serving winger Txetxu Rojo offered a useful recce. It was the first time England had faced an overseas club team, and having been accompanied onto the pitch by a brass band and that *aurresku* dance traditionally used to salute distinguished dignitaries, they played out a fascinating encounter.

England's presence in Bilbao's original San Mames Stadium was historically poignant. Formed back in 1898, the football club came with an anglophile lilt. Basque engineering students had returned from English shores excited about the thriving game, and urged on by an influx of British migrant miners and shipyard workers in the city – along with 50 shirts commandeered from Southampton in 1910 – the club, using its English spelling of Atletico, prospered.

Come the end of the 1981-82 campaign, with a new young Basque coach at the helm in Javier Clemente, Athletic were looking forwards, not backwards. The match against England garnered great interest among fans. Two-time Ballon d'Or winner Kevin Keegan was the main attraction and it was he who broke the deadlock in the first half. However, the hosts took the game to their guests after the interval and an equaliser from talented striker Manuel Sarabia earned them a draw.

In his press briefing afterwards, Greenwood opined, "We played better in the first half and deserved to score more, but Athletic have an ▸

excellent goalkeeper. The second period was more even and the home side impressed me. It was an enjoyable game." The shot-stopper who impressed Greenwood was a 20-year-old Andoni Zubizarreta.

The young man had made his debut under Clemente at the start of that season and, for him as with the team in general, the display that night against a formidable England side concentrated both mind and confidence. "That was an important and historic match," Zubizarreta tells *FourFourTwo*. "England has always been a reference in Bilbao and it was a match that generated a lot of excitement throughout the city."

For Clemente, the performance was also proof that the team and the attitude he was demanding were both strong enough to have them do more than just knock about the upper half of La Liga. Clemente had played for the club, but was forced to retired at just 24 after a bad leg break. In the summer of 1981, aged 31, he had accepted the coaching job, and his enthusiasm and total belief in himself and the team became infectious.

"He was young but he had travelled a lot to learn from famous managers, including Bobby Robson at Ipswich," says Zubizarreta. "He had a very dynamic idea of the game; of pressing and energetic football integrated with fitness and tactics."

Athletic finished a competitive fourth in Clemente's maiden campaign in charge. It was an improvement on their three previous seasons (ninth, seventh, ninth), but there was no sign to outsiders that they could launch a real challenge for the title.

Not that this is an underdog story. Athletic, along with Real Madrid and Barcelona, are to this day the only clubs never to have been relegated from the Spanish top tier. They had been historically successful, had wonderful facilities and a great youth setup. Conversely, contemporary knowledge suggested this was a team more than capable of winning one-off games against their rivals, but not to finish above them in the league.

One of those rivals just so happened to be their Basque neighbours. In 1981 and 1982, San Sebastian's Real Sociedad won back-to-back titles, the second thanks to a final-day victory at home to Athletic. For the players, it was an eye-opener. "It helped us to see that this option was possible," says Zubizarreta. "That match allowed us to experience their achievement live. It made us all realise that winning the league was a realistic prospect."

"WE HAD A STYLE – QUITE BRITISH"

For all of that provincial success, Real Madrid remained the team to beat. And in Catalonia, where Barcelona shared the Basque desire for regional autonomy and an end to the status quo, the ambitious methods at the Camp Nou were a universe away from San Mames.

Already housing German playmaker Bernd Schuster, Barcelona splashed a world-record £5 million to sign Diego Maradona from Boca Juniors. It was a statement signing, inviting presumptions of imminent glory. For Athletic, an institution that remained – and remains – loyal to its unwritten rule of recruiting only players native to its Basque region, any route to the top had become steeper.



Below Sublimely stubborn centre-back Goikoetxea

Yet they were cultivating a hotbed of local talent. Along with Zubizarreta in goal, gifted young players like midfielders Ismael Urtubi and Miguel de Andres impressed among seasoned, technical professionals. Up front they deployed Manu Sarabia and Dani: two deft forwards dripping in Athletic Club spirit. At centre-half, Bilbao-born Inigo Liceranzu partnered Andoni Goikoetxea, a defender of sublime stubbornness.

"For so many guys in the side, getting to represent Athletic was the dream as young footballers," Goikoetxea recalls to *FFT*. "In the '70s, the team had been competitive, but winning the league? Well, that was going to be extremely tough. But in our new, young coach, we suddenly had someone who truly believed in us."

With their coach's conviction came added combativeness. In the autumn of '81, during Clemente's first year in their dugout, Athletic visited the Camp Nou. Goikoetxea crashed into Schuster at knee level and the German tore his cruciate ligament, resulting in him missing the rest of the campaign as well as the forthcoming World Cup. Reputations and grudges were being formed.

Athletic's 1982-83 season started with an unprophetic 2-2 draw against fellow Basques, Osasuna, but the wins soon followed. Home or away, performances stayed solid.

"We hadn't won the league for 27 years, so there were no expectations from us fans," reflects Jose Angel Calvo, who was 13 at the time and attended every match that season. "We were competing, but we still felt inferior to Real Madrid."

In early December, second-placed Athletic hosted the top-of-the-table Merengues, and in keeping with the fans' inferiority complex,

HERE'S TO THE DREAMERS

Over 95 years, only five clubs other than Real Madrid (35), Barcelona (27), Atletico Madrid (11) and Athletic Club (8) have won La Liga



VALENCIA
1942, 1944, 1947, 1971, 2002, 2004

Los Che cemented their name in the Spanish game thanks to three Liga titles in the 1940s. They were champions again in 1970-71, managed by Alfredo Di Stefano (a playing legend); 30 years later, Rafael Benitez (not so much) won two titles.



REAL SOCIEDAD
1981, 1982

Managed by former player Alberto Ormaetxea, Sociedad became the smallest city to be crowned Spanish champions – courtesy of their superior head-to-head record against Real Madrid. To prove it wasn't a fluke, they saw off Barcelona by two points the next season.



DEPORTIVO LA CORUNA
2000

Deportivo won an historic title despite losing 11 Liga games; last term, their 69-point tally wouldn't have got a top-four place. But, galvanised by great home form and the goals of Roy Makaay, they achieved the impossible on the final day.



SEVILLA
1946

Founded by mainly Scottish expats in 1890, Andalusia's most successful football club lifted their sole Liga title in the 1940s. Their hero was Juan Arza, nicknamed *'El Nino de Oro'*, ('The Golden Boy'), who hit 14 goals as his side pipped Barcelona by a single point.



REAL BETIS
1935

Under Spain's Second Republic and prior to the Civil War, Betis dropped the royal patronage and were known just as Betis Balompie when they won their solitary Liga crown. Managed by Irishman Patrick O'Connell, they did it only three seasons after being in the second tier.

they lost 4-2. They had to go to Barcelona a week later, but despite the chastening defeat to Real Madrid, Clemente was able to make his players see the bigger picture. "He convinced us that Real and Barça competed differently," adds Zubizarreta. "He made us see that Barça's game was better for us and that the game we could win was the one at the Camp Nou."

It was the club's first visit since Goikoetxea's infamous tackle on Schuster, and the Barça faithful greeted him with expected ardour. The centre-half's every touch triggered deafening jeers. "It was wonderful," laughs Goikoetxea, with a glint still in his eye. "The more they booed me, the less pressure there was on my team-mates."

Four minutes after half-time, Goikoetxea himself stepped forward and nodded Athletic in front from a left-wing cross. "Silence," he remembers. "You couldn't hear anything. But then the boos got louder and louder." The 1-0 win cemented two things: Athletic were the likeliest challengers to Real Madrid for the title; and theirs was a team able to upset the footballing establishment.

The more they won, the more Clemente's style was scrutinised. Talk of mere destroyers materialised in the sports newspapers. "It was unfair," Goikoetxea tells *FFT*. "The press became very anti-us. We had a style – quite British. Not all good football has to be pretty passes. We played fast football, got the ball forward as quickly as possible and attacked. We had beautiful players."



Above "Wake up lads, there's still another half yet" **Below** Semi-final shootout success at Real Madrid en route to winning the double in '84

Zubizarreta agrees with his old team-mate. "[Clemente] wanted a dynamic, flexible and intense team. We played a very high tempo, with physical intensity. The collective was always the main thing, but we had individual talent that was able to express itself too. The coach also had an excellent eye for strategy when it came to corners and free-kicks – we were a powerful team."

That power continued to flow, and so did the goals. No other team even came close to equalling the Basques' scoring rate of two goals per game – a fact often ignored by the naysayers. But questions remained over the side's consistency, which was Real Madrid's big weapon. In late March, Athletic somehow squeezed a 5-1 defeat at Real Betis between 4-0 trouncings of Salamanca and Celta Vigo. A week later, they travelled to the Bernabeu, lost 2-0 and surrendered top spot to Madrid.

UNITED IN BELIEF

Once again, defeat to Real was followed by the challenge of Barça, this time at a manic San Mames. Athletic were brilliant. Matching the intensity from the terraces, they scored in the first minute and took a 3-0 lead, only for a Maradona-inspired Barcelona to notch two late goals. Backs were pinned to the wall. Athletic held on.

"Days like this were what made the team special," says Goikoetxea. "In hard moments, we could look at each other with belief. To all be from the same region, to all be Basque, to have those shared experiences, we knew we could trust each other, and on that occasion we won the game." ▸

> **"GOIKOETXEA NEVER DESERVED THE LABEL OF A 'BUTCHER'. HE WAS VERY SKILFUL"**

That understanding was also evident in the stadium itself. San Mames was known as 'The Cathedral' – a divine, tight arena in the centre of the city. "I've been to some English stadiums, such as Highbury, and it was like that," says George Viar, an Athletic fan who was 12 in 1983. "It was unique in Spain."

Matchday brought the whole city together. "We would go there as a group of friends," says Calvo. "The stadium was surrounded by apartments. The bars were always full and loud. Whatever the weather, we would stand, with no roof to cover us, and I think the atmosphere we made helped the team."

To add to that passionate environment, the club first played its now-beloved anthem before a game in March 1983. A triumphant, operatic call to arms, the lyrics celebrate both the team and the Basque flag's red, white and green colours:

Red and white youth.
On the green pitch.
Pride of The Basque Country!

Local fervour and unflinching pride for the region had pushed the team so close to glory, but as the season's climax approached, the ultimate prize was seemingly, desperately, out of reach. On the final weekend, Athletic travelled to Majorca to take on Las Palmas while Real Madrid, requiring only a draw to secure the title, visited second-from-bottom Valencia. Each opponent needed a result to avoid the drop, but for those passionate fans in Bilbao, hope wasn't in abundance.

"How could we win it?" queries Calvo. "We weren't even disappointed – it was a superb season. 'Maybe next year?' we said. My family and four others all gathered around a small radio to listen."

In the third minute, Las Palmas scored. But then so did Valencia, and though strikes from Sarabia and Dani sent Athletic into half-time leading, Real Madrid still needed their goal. Athletic's players talked of just doing their job, but as the second period evolved – with Athletic notching another three goals and Valencia holding on – those families around their radio bunched closer and closer to it.

The minutes went by as they awaited that fateful, inexorable Real Madrid goal. Chances came and went. Madrid hit the crossbar, then hit it again. But the goal never came. Athletic Club were champions of Spain for a seventh time. "Oh, it was disbelief," recounts Calvo, beaming. "There was screaming, there was shouting – I can hear them now!"





Top Diego takes one for the team **Above** Euphoric scenes in Madrid as Athletic clinch the Copa del Rey

A decade had passed without winning any silverware and for one club director, Cecilio Gerrikabeitia, a function at City Hall wouldn't do. For a city built along the Ria de Bilbao, it was decided to use a river barge – La Gabarra – to show off the trophy.

Schoolchildren were let out and more than a million people lined the riverbanks for a day that those present continue to discuss with a devotion that defies time. "It's very difficult to describe, even for us players who were on La Gabarra," reflects Zubizarreta. "All those people, of all social classes and ages, from all the nearby towns, the river and the roads packed... those were hard economic, social and political times in the Basque Country, but they were days full of light and joy."

"IS THERE A BALL ON THE PITCH?"

During that summer of 1983, light and joy were replaced by catastrophic floods that besieged the city and the area, but amid the destruction, Clemente's team continued to shine brightly. Yet controversy and claims of destroying the game were amplified in late September when Goikoetxea scythed down Maradona, breaking the maestro's ankle and sidelining him for three months.

"It was very hard to time a tackle against Maradona," Goikoetxea tells *FFT*. "I didn't mean to hurt him. But, just moments before, Schuster had made a terrible tackle on me near the touchline – he was out for revenge for two years earlier – and the referee did nothing. Feeling frustrated, my next tackle on Diego was a forceful one. It was regrettable."

The press had their villain. Athletic's rivals had their soundbites. Barça were now being



managed by Argentine World Cup-winning boss Cesar Luis Menotti, who quickly labelled Athletic as "anti-footballers", even calling for Clemente to be given a lifetime ban. "That's what Barcelona always do," says Goikoetxea. "As soon as a team tries to take them on and is successful, they mention 'anti-football'. Nothing ever changes."

That Camp Nou clash ended in a 4-0 defeat for Athletic, but they now had a resolve that such setbacks wouldn't dent team spirit, and were very much in the title picture when they faced Liverpool in the European Cup second round in the autumn of 1983. In the Anfield first leg, they earned a goalless draw with Goikoetxea imperious against Ian Rush and Kenny Dalglish.

The second leg was just as tight. Liverpool matched Athletic's pragmatism; Sammy Lee was heard to ask if there was even a ball on the pitch. A 66th-minute header from Rush clinched the tie. "Bilbao had a reputation as a rough team," Reds captain Graeme Souness later wrote. "They were good losers against us, though – especially the fans, who clapped us onto our bus and passed round their [wine-filled] leather drinking pouches."

Meanwhile, the English press were dubbing Goikoetxea 'The Butcher of Bilbao'. Amid the general character assassination, he shone in a title race that was once again going to the wire. "Everyone loved Goikoetxea," declares Calvo. "He never deserved that label. He was a skilful defender, very good on the ball, and I remember a goal he scored when we beat Real Madrid near the end of that campaign. He ran and leapt and rose above everyone to head the ball in. It was so elegant."

Four games remained after that 2-1 victory, and Athletic had won two of them prior to their final-day decider against Real Sociedad at San Mames. With both Real Madrid and Barcelona in touch, they needed a win to seal back-to-back crowns. Athletic took the lead through Liceranzu, but Sociedad showed no neighbourly love, equalising in the second half. No matter – Athletic's set-piece aptitude bore fruit when Liceranzu headed the winner with 11 minutes left. Champions again, this time in front of 40,000 of their own people.

And more was to come, with the Copa del Rey final against Barcelona in Madrid. It was a tie played in a zealous anti-establishment atmosphere, but between two teams who had no time for each other. And so, Endika Guarrotxena's winner for Athletic wasn't the end of it. On the whistle, things turned ugly.

Above Clemente had his critics but delivered success **Below** Fans of all ages went out to greet La Gabarra

"We're prepared to respond to determined violence with the same violence," Menotti had worryingly announced before the final. Clearly. Now seething with frustration and having seen what he felt was a provocative hand gesture from unused substitute Miguel Angel Sola, Maradona directed a knee into Sola's face, followed by an elbow, knocking him out. Chaos ensued – a bar-room brawl that ultimately brought an end to Maradona's time in Spain and dented Athletic's double-winning celebrations.

"It's an ending that hurts all of us who were there," sighs Zubizarreta. "It has nothing to do with the spirit of the team, but with the circumstances of the game. What we prefer to remember is the two years and the club's capacity to spread joy and pride of belonging. I think everyone in Bilbao knows where they were and what they were doing when the decisive matches were played, or when we were received back in Bilbao. Everyone has an anecdote, a memory, a photo or a flag from those days. Yes, they were very happy times."

One of Jose Angel Calvo's memories was leaving the ground after that title-clinching win over Real Sociedad and his dad turning to him: "He looked at me and said, 'Enjoy this night, because it isn't going to happen again'." For the supporter, it seems dads are always right. In 40 years since, the club have gone on to win a pair of Supercopas, but that title, so dominated by the riches of their old rivals, remains elusive.

One dad hasn't given up the fight, though. "My daughter was born when we won the first of our two titles," says Goikoetxea. "She has never seen us enjoy this kind of success. I want her and others to see it again."

Athletic Club can hope. After all, they have already proved that dreams can come true.

SHORE THINGS

Como were in Italy's fourth tier as recently as 2019, but with help from Cesc Fabregas they have surged to the verge of Serie A this term – *FFT* headed to the picturesque location to witness a key promotion clash

Words Ed McCambridge
Pictures Andrea Butti

'Como! Thou, a treasure whom the Earth keeps to herself' – English poet William Wordsworth fell in love with northern Italy's sun-kissed lakes during a walking tour in 1790.

He wouldn't be the last. In the centuries since, countless more have eloped to this city for sunshine and exquisite cuisine; romantic getaways and honeymoons.

It is, therefore, with some disappointment, that *FourFourTwo* splashes on to the tarmac at Milan airport to find the entire Lombardy region is in the eye of a biblical storm that will last the next four days. "It's not normally like this," laughs *FFT*'s chauffeur for the day, Davide, clutching an umbrella. "One or two days of rain, sure, but this is crazy."

We're thankful, at least, as we wind through the sodden farmland that separates Milan from Como, that we're not here for romance, but a football match of potentially enorme importanza: Serie B's showdown between fourth-placed Como 1907 and second-placed Venezia. Only two teams automatically go up to Italy's top flight each season. Leaders Parma have a healthy advantage and so, with 11 matches remaining, victory for either side could prove crucial.

We pull up at Como's training ground as the first team and primavera squads file out of freshly-painted changing rooms and onto pristine training pitches – diggers and heaps of soil providing a curious backdrop through the drizzle. *FFT* is welcomed into a newly-completed canteen and handed a teeny-tiny Italian coffee. With little over 48 hours to go until Venezia's visit, there's a buzz around the club, but that hasn't always been the case. ▸


STORE



As recently as 2017, Como were declared bankrupt after being relegated to Serie C, Italy's third tier. That summer, they were bought out by Akosua Puni Essien – the wife of ex-Chelsea, Milan and Ghana midfielder Michael – yet further financial problems saw the Lariani banished to Serie D ahead of the 2017-18 campaign.

It was merely the latest in a lengthy series of bankruptcies, liquidations and financial misdemeanours that have plagued the club since relegation from Serie A in 2003; a sorry state of affairs for the former home of Paolo Rossi, Marco Tardelli and Gianluca Zambrotta. Fans of a certain vintage even recall Como's participation in the golden age of Serie A in the late 1980s.

"As a child, I remember climbing the fence around the pitch to get a better view of Diego Maradona playing against us," lifelong Como fan Marco Melillo explains to *FFT*. "It was like he had this glow around him. I saw Marco van Basten, Ruud Gullit and Frank Rijkaard playing for Milan, too. But those days became a distant memory in recent years. I even feared we would lose our club forever."

That all changed in 2019, when Como were bought by Indonesian conglomerate Djarum, whose empire encompasses everything from online streaming to dairy. Djarum's idea had been to purchase a team that would allow Indonesian starlets to develop in European football. But only after buying Como did they realise Italian law prohibited non-EU players from obtaining the necessary permits.

"That came as a bit of a blow to us," says Mirwan Suwarso, a representative for the ownership group, before training gets going. "So we went back to the drawing board and simply decided to make Como the best club we possibly could."

Djarum inherited a club with no facilities, no stadium to call their own and employees that regularly went unpaid. That the team was promoted from Serie D just a few months later seems something of a miracle.

"There was a very good group of players already at the club when we took charge," confirms Suwarso. "Some of which are still in the squad now. Our job was to build on that, while laying off-field foundations to return this side to the top level."

"WHEN I SAW CESC TRAINING, I THOUGHT, 'WOW! THIS ISN'T A VIDEO GAME, THIS IS REAL'"

The man placed in charge of that process was ex-Chelsea captain Dennis Wise, who'd already been working under Suwarso in the Indonesian football academy, prior to the Como deal. The 21-cap England midfielder was soon appointed as sporting director and later acted as an advisor.

"It was all about creating something from scratch," Wise later said. "We bought back the academy, which had been outsourced, we bought a training ground and agreed a 99-year lease on the stadium, which was owned by the local authorities with plans to knock it down and redevelop it."

Wise's knowhow, coupled with considerable backing, helped Como to win Serie C in only their second campaign back in the third tier. Supporters were thrilled. "We'd initially been sceptical of the Indonesians," fan Melillo told us. "But they quickly won us round."

Djarum's investment in the town and the people of Como was key to that. During the COVID pandemic, they funded free testing for residents. Later, they saved a local theatre from closing. Today, proceeds from kit sales go to Como-based charities. "It's the ethos of the group," continues Suwarso. "Build the community, be a part of it, grow together."

Top "You can't park that here" **Right** The fans refuse to let the rotten weather dampen spirits

CESC EDUCATION

If fans were already excited about a return to Serie B, imagine their ecstasy when, one year and one mid-table finish later, the club announced Cesc Fabregas would arrive as a player and minority shareholder. In August 2022, Thierry Henry followed his old Arsenal team-mate onto the Como board. Henry, the manager of France Under-21s, has promised to "stay in his lane" with regard to the general running of the club, but is regularly sounded out for his insights.

Fabregas made 17 appearances for Como in the 2022-23 season before hanging up his boots at the end of the season – he became head coach of the club's U19s and B teams, then took interim charge of the first team in November when Moreno Longo was sacked amid reported concerns about style, despite the club being sixth in the table.

Fabregas won three of his five matches in charge but, with the required coaching badge not yet attained, the 36-year-old took a step back in December to serve as assistant to Osian 'Osh' Roberts – Wales' No.2 under Chris Coleman and Ryan Giggs, then at Crystal Palace under Fabregas and Henry's former Arsenal pal Patrick Vieira.

When training finally ends today, Como's players trudge into the adjacent changing rooms for a well-earned shower and Cesc joins *FFT* for a chinwag. "First time in Como?" he asks, before breaking into a cheeky grin. "Probably your last with this weather!"

Between mouthfuls of a rather delicious-looking peach tart, he reveals what appealed about the project. "For me, it was the chance to grow into something here, from player to coach," he says. "I have fire in my belly again. Working with a mentor like Osh is incredible and I'm learning so much so quickly – his experience is amazing."

Fabregas played under some of the greatest managers of the modern game, from Arsene Wenger and Pep Guardiola to Jose Mourinho and Vicente del Bosque. He says he wouldn't be averse to getting in touch with any of them if needed. "I haven't done yet, because this has all happened so fast, but absolutely I would love to," he enthuses. "I have some ideas about what sort of coach I want to be, but I'm young and have lots to learn. I'm not shy to ask for advice from people who know more than me."

Fabregas confirms he's in discussions with the ownership group about implementing a long-term vision at the club. "I can't tell you it though, it's top secret!" he laughs. "But, no, it's about creating a winning culture – we'll do that by instilling the discipline and mentality it takes to reach the top level. I want us to be a family. We spend more waking hours here than we do at home, so it's crucial that we're close to each other."

After coming 13th in 2022-23, albeit only two points off the play-offs. this term's target was never to go up, but Como's fine form has made Sunday's Venezia clash a promotion six-pointer. Fabregas isn't too fazed. "I have pressure to be the best husband, the best father and the best coach I can be – that's my pressure," he says. "It's more important to me to help the players perform at their best. It's a massive game, of course, but we need to concentrate on our preparation and not worry about pressure."

After Fabregas shuffles off, *FFT* is joined by a selection of his players. Their enthusiasm for working under one of the best midfielders of his generation is palpable. "The first time I saw Cesc at training, I thought, 'Wow! This ▸













isn't a PlayStation game, this is real'," laughs forward Alessandro Gabrielloni, one of the few to have risen with the club from Serie D to Serie B. "He might have been towards the end of his playing career but you could still see his quality. To have him as a coach now is a huge honour."

No footballer has been confronted with this club's transformation more starkly than midfielder Alessio Iovine. The local lad was forced to leave after the 2017's bankruptcy, but returned in 2022 under the new owners. "I was there for the darkest period and I saw what it did to the fans," he remembers. "The facilities and atmosphere around the place now are a world apart. It's hugely exciting." Our chat with the 33-year-old is curtailed by news that his partner is poised to give birth any minute. How rude...

Como's chances of beating Venezia this weekend have been given a huge boost by the return to fitness of Patrick Cutrone. The former Milan and Wolves forward has been capped for Italy, and is widely considered one of the most technically gifted players in Serie B. He'd scored four goals in five games leading up to his injury, and was crushed to be sidelined. "I'm desperate to make an impact for my team-mates," explains the 26-year-old. "Purely in terms of ambition, you can compare this club with the others I've played for. They've given us the tools we need to succeed here and it's very important for us to repay that."

"IN TERMS OF AMBITION, YOU CAN COMPARE THIS CLUB WITH MILAN, VALENCIA, WOLVES..."

Top Locals are behind the team and daring to dream of Serie A **Right** Football's most beautiful backdrop (when the sun's out)?

THE PERFECT SETTING

The following lunchtime, we set off to the Stadio Giuseppe Sinigaglia to watch an open training session on the eve of the match. The ground, which was built in 1927 at the behest of Benito Mussolini and named in honour of a local war hero, overhangs the alluring Lake Como and can be accessed by walking along the mosaic-tiled promenade.

It surely must be among the most beautiful approaches to any stadium in world football, even as the heavens start to open. On *FFT*'s left is gently-lapping blue water, enveloped by fishing boats and the snow-capped Alps; on our right, neoclassical villas and decorative gardens with sculptures of Juno and Mars.

There's a buzz in the air as the stadium swings into view, and it's not only the fans making their way through the turnstiles. On the lake, seaplanes take off from the water. Not many football grounds can count an aircraft hangar as a next door neighbour. *FFT* could watch them soaring into the storm clouds all afternoon but, thankfully, another feast for the eyes awaits us within.

Disinterested locals could be forgiven for thinking the game had been moved forward a day, with stands sagging under the weight of raucous supporters clutching banners and flags. Evidently, the wretched weather hasn't dampened spirits. The players emerge to wild applause as Fabregas and Roberts put them through their paces. "Tomorrow's match is really important, so the least we can do is show our support," fan Andrea shouts to *FFT* above the noise. "We're just grateful to have a club we can support, after everything that has happened. Forza Como!"

Post-session, as the players sign shirts and pose for pictures, we catch up with manager Roberts, who confirms this is nothing unusual. "You can see what this club means to the people," he says. "Tomorrow will be a huge game for the city. We're playing some good football at the moment and we're confident we can get a win."

Roberts will become head of development once Fabregas takes over the managerial reins, and it's a role he's looking forward to. "The chance to help build a club essentially from the ground up is one I couldn't say no to," he adds. "It will be my job to help bring through the next generation of talent. For the time being, though, my role is to share my experience with Cesc and help him on his journey. He's got a deep understanding of the game and wants to learn as much as he can."

As the fans file out, *FFT* heads to the nearby village of Bellagio, which inspired the theme of a famous hotel in Las Vegas, and is known for its cobbled streets, gelaterias and views across Lake Como. Over lunch, we chew the fat with Como's head of analytics Chris Galley, previously of Brentford, and Ryan Shelton, head of commercial.

Galley says there are few Serie B sides who take analytics as seriously as Como. "My role ▸

BIZARRE BIGWIGS

Dennis Wise's involvement at Como isn't the only example of a former Premier League player playing an off-field role at an unexpected club

BRIAN DEANE FERIZAJ

Seemingly hell-bent on being known for something other than scoring the Premier League's first ever goal back in 1993, former Sheffield United and Leeds hitman Deane has spent his post-playing days in odd places. After managing Norwegian top-flight side Sarpsborg, the Englishman and his business associates bought a 51 per cent stake in second-tier Kosovan club Ferizaj in 2019. Nope, us neither.

JAMIE VARDY ROCHESTER NEW YORK

Rochester 'Raging' Rhinos had been a successful side in America's second tier prior to going on hiatus in 2017 due to lack of funding. Up stepped Leicester legend and Premier League champion Vardy, who was announced as the co-owner of the rebranded RNYFC in 2021. The club made the play-offs in the new MLS Next Pro league, but were out of business within two years citing an "unsustainable business model".

N'GOLO KANTE VIRTON

Another invaluable member of the Premier League-winning Foxes, Kante acquired Belgian club Royal Excelsior Virton in the summer of 2023, after their relegation from the second tier. The France international juggles his duties with those of playing for Saudi Pro League outfit Al-Ittihad, alongside Karim Benzema, Fabinho and Celtic star Jota. It's a good job the former Chelsea man is known for his energy.

CESAR AZPILICUETA HASHTAG UNITED

Former Chelsea captain Azpilicueta loves English football, becoming a part-owner of social media darlings Hashtag United in 2018 during his days at Stamford Bridge. Now in the eighth-tier Isthmian Premier Division, the minnows have their sights set on Premier League football and owner Spencer Owen believes they'll need "hundreds of millions" to get there. Could you lend us a few quid, Dave?






COMO
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is ensuring that data plays a key part in our decision making," he explains. "I'm in regular contact with Cesc and Osh, and try to provide them with the information they need to make the best choices. We want to get ahead of the competition in any tiny way we can."

Shelton tells us about their general plans to expand the stadium. The Stadio Giuseppe Sinigaglia's current capacity is around 7,500 – a good 5,000 short of Serie A requirements. That would mean a short-term solution in the event of promotion but the idea, ultimately, is to rebuild the entire thing.

Back in Como, we're forced to take refuge from the rain in the Basilica di San Giorgio, a 12th-century Roman Catholic church, and enter to discover that 6pm mass is underway.

Among the congregation, an elderly couple are sporting blue and white Como scarves. On the eve of the biggest match of the season, it doesn't take a great deal of imagination to guess what they'll be praying for.

FIGHTING SPIRIT

FFT isn't set in its ways when it comes to pre-match rituals, but eating pizza with a UFC star is a new one. Como vs Venezia is just hours away when we meet Stephen 'Wonderboy' Thompson for a margherita. The American welterweight is attending his first "soccer" match, after spending the weekend creating content with Como players for an Indonesian sports streaming service. It's a reminder of the scale of Djarum's enterprise.

After lunch, we pop to an ultras pub in the shadow of the ground to meet Scottish expat Patsy McVey, her teenage daughter Aurora and their friends from the Curva. Around us, throngs of supporters huddle under parasols, sinking pints out of plastic cups. Despite the weather, the vibe is electric.

"It never used to be like this before games," beams Patsy, in a thick Glaswegian accent. "With all of the financial problems, the stands were almost empty for matches when I first started coming around 10 years ago. Now, we're sold out for every home game."

Aurora, Como born and bred and a diehard since the age of seven, has never felt more connected to her club. "The unity between the team, the owners and the Como people has grown and grown," she continues. "I'm so proud of this club. I go to away games as well and we're seeing more come with us. Playing in Serie A would only help with that."

"A DECADE AGO, STANDS WERE ALMOST EMPTY – NOW WE'RE SOLD OUT EVERY HOME MATCH"

Our conversation is curtailed by ultras group Curva Como 1907 noisily gathering at the end of the street for an organised march into the stadium. Fronted by an enormous banner bearing the group's crest, the black-clad contingent storm towards the Giuseppe Sinigaglia beneath blue flares and plumes of smoke. We join those around us by necking our pint and following the procession inside.

If the stadium was loud for yesterday's training session, it's cacophonous now; the Curva a swirling sea of blue and white. Epic flags swing from the melee, while choreo leaders bark instructions via megaphones.

Amid the chaos, *FFT* spots 2006 World Cup winner Zambrotta, who made his name at Como prior to stints with Juventus, Barcelona and Milan. "The stadium is more or less the same as when I used to play here," says the former right-back who won 100 Italy caps. "There is always a great atmosphere – the support of the Como people is always there. I hope to see this club in Serie A very soon."

As Zambrotta takes his seat, *FFT* joins Patsy and Aurora in the Curva in time for kick-off. From up in the gods, we can see across Lake Como to the hills beyond – it's a breathtaking place to watch football.

The first whistle blows and it soon becomes apparent why Venezia are second in the table. They knock the ball around fluidly, drawing in Como players before switching play smartly. Despite their possession, Como fashion the better chances. Our old pal Gabrielloni, who has risen with the club from Serie D, rounds the goalkeeper midway through the first half only to run the ball out of play before he can find the unguarded net.

They don't waste their next chance, though. French winger Lucas Da Cunha cuts a cross back to the edge of the penalty area, where playmaker Simone Verdi rifles the ball past Venezia's goalkeeper to send the home fans into raptures – 1-0 after 38 minutes.

The lead doesn't last. Two minutes later, the ball is whipped across Como's box and Finnish striker Joel Pohjanpalo nods it inside the far post. Roberts and Fabregas make their dissatisfaction known as the teams trudge inside for the break.

Early in the second period, Como bring on new father Iovine at right-back, followed by the talismanic Cutrone, fresh after injury. The latter receives a huge ovation. Yet it's Venezia who continue to threaten, hitting the crossbar twice in quick succession. Como are wobbling.

With less than 10 minutes to go, Venezia create a golden opportunity to win it, but Marco Olivieri's close-range effort is blocked by Croatian goalkeeper Adrian Semper. It's a fantastic save, but next to us on the Curva, Aurora is barely able to watch.

As the clock ticks past 90 minutes, it looks like Como have held on. A point is more than fair, but there's still time for one last chance.

Iovine receives the ball out wide and, in what can only be described as the second-best delivery by a member of his family this weekend, sends it arcing towards the far post, prompting the entire stadium to hold its breath. As the ball descends, Cutrone lets it fall across his body before unleashing an exocet into the roof of Venezia's net.

An eruption breaks out: players, substitutes and coaches spill onto the pitch in ecstasy. Venezia slump to the turf as fireworks whizz across the lake and explode in the night sky. When the referee blows the final whistle several fuzzy minutes later, the scoreboard reads Como 2 Venezia 1 – the hosts climbing to third in the table above the beaten visitors.

Post-game, it's a long time before Como's players can be separated from the Curva. *FFT* catches a quick word with Cutrone amid the celebrations. "I've scored goals before, but not many as special as that one," he smiles. "This club deserves to be in Serie A. The fans were incredible tonight."

As the stands slowly empty around us, we head to a local bar to share in the euphoria until the wee hours. There are songs, chants, even an invitation to join a pair of fans on the drive to Cremonese, for the next six-pointer. We'd love to stay, we assure them, but frankly we're sick of the weather.

The next morning, feeling a little worse for wear, *FFT* gets a call from Aurora. "Did you enjoy yourself?" she asks. "I've never heard celebrations like that before. We're one step closer to Serie A. I hope we can do it. This is such a special club."

It's difficult to disagree with that statement as *FFT*'s plane departs Milan, ascending over Lombardy and above the clouds. For the first time in days, we see a glimpse of blinding sun and feel we might know exactly what William Wordsworth was getting at.

COMO ON THE RISE

Since financial chaos dropped them into the fourth tier, the lakeside club have made steady progress

2017-18 Serie D	**2nd**
2018-19 Serie D	**1st**
2019-20 Serie C	**13th**
2020-21 Serie C	**1st**
2021-22 Serie B	**13th**
2022-23 Serie B	**13th**
2023-24 Serie B	**3rd**

Correct as of March 7


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CALCIO COMO
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THE WEIRD HISTORY OF OLYMPIC FOOTBALL



featuring Thierry Henry, protesting sailors and a very angry Hitler

France have an all-star boss targeting gold in Paris – but if the past 128 years are anything to go by, he'll have to navigate some bizarre events to succeed...

Words Chris Flanagan

Great Britain don't have a football team at the 2024 Olympics, but three British bosses will be there – as well as some little-known bloke called Thierry Henry. Installed as the manager of France's under-21s last year, Henry is also in charge of their Olympic men's team, who are hosting the Games and heavy favourites to win gold. No pressure, Titi...

Alexandre Lacazette, Jean-Philippe Mateta and Michael Olise were all selected for the preliminary squad – Lacazette and Mateta as designated overage players – with young PSG talents Warren Zaire-Emery and Bradley Barcola named in both the provisional roster and France's Euro 2024 squad. Les Bleus' first game is against the USA on the opening day of the football tournament, at Marseille's Stade Velodrome on July 24, ahead of the final at Parc des Princes in Paris on August 9.

Brazil have failed to qualify for the men's tournament despite winning gold at each of the last two Olympics. However, the group stage does offer up more than one clash of the titans: there's the Dominican Republic vs Uzbekistan, Mali vs Israel and Iraq vs Ukraine for starters, while Guinea face a New Zealand side managed by former Watford defender Darren Bazeley. Oh, and Javier Mascherano is coaching Argentina.

Favourites for the women's gold are the USA, guided by Emma Hayes, who departed Chelsea two months ago to move Stateside. She'll attempt to wrestle the Olympic prize from fellow Englishwoman Bev Priestman, who steered Canada to glory in Tokyo.

The French women's hopes rest with Herve Renard, mastermind of Saudi Arabia's shock win over Argentina at the men's World Cup in 2022, but England's disappointing form in the Nations League means that Great Britain haven't qualified, as they did in Tokyo.

It's the latest chapter in GB's in-out flirtation with Olympic football – a competition that was strange from the outset...

THE MATCH THAT NEVER EXISTED

Football wasn't officially part of the maiden Olympics in 1896, after several of the invited teams didn't turn up. A game did take place but reporting it was bizarrely forbidden, with Greek Crown Prince Constantine keen to keep all unofficial sports out of the media. Just as well: the details that emerged were sketchy, but Denmark reportedly demolished Greece either 9-0 or 15-0 – nothing in between – in a fixture refereed by Constantine's younger brother, prince of both Greece and Denmark.

Greece took another three decades to get their act together and tighten up the defence, presumably after a root-and-branch review and the immediate installation of a 1900s St George's Park (back in those days, a field). By the time they played their first official FIFA match in 1927, they lost only 4-1 to Italy. Much better.

UPTON PARK: GOLD MEDALLISTS

The Greece and Denmark sides of 1896 were dominated by players from individual clubs.

When the Olympics' first official football tournament took place four years later, Great Britain were represented by east Londoners, Upton Park FC.

Involved in the inaugural 1871-72 FA Cup, the club ended up in the Southern Alliance rather than the new Football League, then accepted the invitation to act as GB in Paris and won the thing, beating Club Francais 4-0 in their solitary game to bag gold.

The only other outfit competing were the Free University of Brussels, though the bronze medallists were registered as a 'Mixed Team' instead of Belgium because their party also included a Brit and a Dutchman.

"BEWARE: 17-1 IS A DANGEROUS LEAD"

The early Olympics weren't always entirely competitive. In 1908, Great Britain smashed Sweden 12-1 at London's White City, while Denmark thrashed France 17-1 thanks to 10 goals from Sophus Nielsen.

GB beat Denmark in the final by the rather more sensible scoreline of 2-0, then scooped their third gold medal in four Olympic Games by triumphing again in 1912. Germany beat Russia 16-0 during that event, with Gottfried Fuchs also netting 10.

Football had almost been removed from the 1912 Games, as hosts Sweden were worried that its "popularity was not yet worldwide." Give it a few years, guys.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA: NO FANS OF JOHN LEWIS

Teams were certainly taking it more seriously in 1920, after the First World War escalated tensions. Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey were all uninvited, then Belgium faced Czechoslovakia in the final.

Belgium led 2-0 in front of a huge crowd in Antwerp when the Czechs walked off before half-time, protesting against English referee John Lewis and probably his Christmas ads to boot. The match was eventually abandoned and Czechoslovakia were refused a medal, so Spain snaffled silver.

HOW ABOUT A WORLD CUP?

By 1928, the tournament had expanded so much that FIFA sensed an opportunity.

Four years earlier, Uruguay had become the first South Americans to enter, voyaging to France on third-class boat tickets and storming to gold, partly because none of the European squads knew who the hell their players were. They were pretty handy, as it turned out.

Uruguay defeated Argentina to win 1928 gold, too, and participation from Chile, the USA, Mexico and Egypt gave the competition a fresh global feel, even if Egypt lost 11-3 to Italy in the bronze medal match.

Great Britain opted to stay home in 1924 and 1928, steadfast in their belief that only amateur players should be chosen. They'd lost to Norway in 1920 prior to withdrawing, as other nations began to pick professionals.

But football was the Games' most popular event in 1928, attracting more than 250,000 ticket requests. A day before the tournament started in Amsterdam, Jules Rimet presided over a FIFA congress in the city, which voted that a World Cup would commence in 1930. A wrangle between the International Olympic Committee and FIFA ensued, leading football to be dropped from the 1932 Games, but it soon returned in '36 for amateurs and state-sponsored players.





Above Uruguay triumph in 1928 **Below** The only time a German outfit has ever won gold, in '76

HITLER'S NOT HAPPY

It wasn't just Great Britain that Norway irked: they managed to annoy Adolf Hitler as well.

The 1936 Olympics were infamously held in Berlin during the Third Reich. Great Britain took part but lost 5-4 to Poland in the quarter-finals, falling at the same stage as the hosts. Hitler had rocked up to watch his first ever game of football, planning it as a propaganda opportunity to demonstrate Germany's power to the world... except that plan went awry when Norway, who had led since the opening stages, extended their lead to 2-0 with seven minutes remaining and the red-faced dictator flounced out of the stadium. "The Fuhrer is incensed," revealed Joseph Goebbels, though there is no surviving record of whether he chucked his season ticket at the manager on his way out.

Hitler never attended another match for the rest of his life. However, there were some odd goings-on a day later when Germany's allies, Austria, trailed Peru 4-2, only for a pitch invasion to occur in the final minute of extra time. An Austrian player went down injured ▸

and the game was abandoned. Other reports suggested the referee had suddenly noticed, a couple of hours too late, that the pitch was the wrong size.

A replay was ordered, but Peru took their entire Olympic team home in protest. Back in Lima, locals tore down the Olympic flag and peppered the German consulate with stones.

WEMBLEY, HIGHBURY... DULWICH HAMLET?!

No fewer than 11 grounds were selected to stage fixtures at the 1948 London Olympics. Wembley got the final, because water is wet, but elsewhere Luxembourg hit Afghanistan for six at Brighton's Goldstone Ground, France beat 2-1 India at Ilford, Turkey tonked China in Walthamstow and South Korea overcame Mexico at Dulwich Hamlet's Champion Hill.

Great Britain fielded a ragtag line-up from teams as disparate as Barnet and Queen's Park, led by 39-year-old Manchester United gaffer Matt Busby. He may have been great, but he wasn't yet a miracle worker: GB lost their semi 3-1 to Yugoslavia, then the bronze medal match 5-3 to Denmark.



"NO ONE TELL STALIN THE RESULT..."

Sweden celebrated gold in 1948, but the next eight Olympics were won by the Eastern Bloc as state funding ensured their teams were superior to other countries' amateur players.

Hungary wheeled out Ferenc Puskas to seal victory in 1952. FA secretary Stanley Rous was so impressed, he invited them for a friendly at Wembley the following year, and possibly regretted it when the Magyars subsequently humiliated England 6-3.

The USSR also had high hopes at the 1952 Games in Helsinki, but took on Yugoslavia in a first-round grudge match – Joseph Stalin had fallen out with Yugoslavia's Communist leader, Josip Broz Tito, and even tried to have him assassinated. The USSR came from 5-1 down to draw 5-5 but lost the replay, and the result wasn't mentioned in the Soviet press until Stalin's death a year later.

It didn't end there, either: CDSA Moscow, who had provided most of the players, were expelled from the Soviet league and promptly disbanded, despite being champions in each of the previous five seasons. Some claimed it was opportunism to aid KGB chief Lavrentiy Beria, honorary president of rivals Dinamo Moscow. Who clinched the next two titles? Er, Spartak...

Above France are victorious at the Rose Bowl **Below** Dulwich: international football venue

SAILORS' MUTINY

Great Britain exited 5-3 to Luxembourg in the preliminary round in 1952, so it's no surprise



WITH GB TRAILING AT HALF-TIME, 80 MARINERS STAGED A PROTEST MARCH TO INSPIRE A FIGHTBACK



Top Italy beat Norway en route to gold in 1936 **Above** "We hate to make a fuss, we really do, but we'd be awfully grateful if you could just fly the right effing flag"

that four years later, a defeat to Bulgaria was too much for a band of GB-supporting sailors.

With GB trailing at half-time in Melbourne, 80 mariners from the visiting HMS Newcastle leapt a pitchside fence and staged a protest march in a bid to inspire a fightback, wielding an umbrella in English colours and a banner saying, 'Up The Lions'. Stimulating stuff! Police quickly escorted them out of the ground and Bulgaria won 6-1.

GB appeared at the Games once more, in 1960. They failed to qualify for the following three tournaments and then withdrew until hosting signalled a return in 2012.

THE RISE OF EAST GERMANY

They qualified for just the one World Cup, but East Germany did win Olympic gold in 1976.

Twelve years earlier, they pocketed bronze as the United Team of Germany: East beat West in a play-off to determine which would progress to the Games under that moniker. Bronze was theirs again in Munich in 1972, edging West Germany in the second group stage and drawing with the USSR in the third-place match, meaning the medal was shared, though the Soviet team doctor later declared that the game was fixed.

In the 1976 battle of the Communist states, North Korean An Gil-wan was banned after attacking the referee not once, not twice but three times during a 3-0 loss to the Soviets, before East Germany beat Poland in the final – the only time that any German outfit has won the Olympic men's football tournament.

SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

After gold medal joy for Hungary (thrice), the USSR, Yugoslavia, Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the east's dominance finally concluded in 1984 – thanks to a rule change, then a boycott. Professionals were allowed to take part, as long as they hadn't played at a World Cup, while an under-23s stipulation was also introduced in 1992.

When Czechoslovakia, East Germany and the USSR boycotted the 1984 Games in Los Angeles amid Cold War tensions, it left the path clear for France to triumph, seeing off a Brazil team containing a young Dunga in front of 101,799 spectators at the Rose Bowl. A decade later, Dunga would be back at the same stadium, hoisting the World Cup after Roberto Baggio blazed his penalty high into the Pasadena sky.

THE WRONG ATHENS

A century after the inaugural Olympics, the first women's football tournament was held in 1996. Fittingly, the final was in Athens... Athens, Georgia, that is.

Possibly as a result of some mix-up, like the Belgium fans who ended up in the Yorkshire village of Wales before a key clash against the country of Wales in 2015, the small city of Athens, 70 miles from Atlanta, was the setting as the USA beat China on home soil. They would win four of the first five women's Olympic events, succeeding in Athens again (the proper one), then Beijing and London.

"MO SALAH? NOT INTERESTED"

Fewer than 9,000 people watched Mohamed Salah play in a 50,000-capacity stadium at London 2012... mainly as hardly anyone had heard of him back then. The 20-year-old was yet to make his Basel bow, having just moved from Al Mokawloon, when he netted against Belarus at Hampden Park to follow his earlier strikes against Brazil and New Zealand.

It was the lowest crowd in either the male or female competitions. The highest was the 86,000 that saw Neymar's Brazil improbably lose to Mexico in the men's final.

A Spain side boasting Juan Mata and Jordi Alba somehow managed not to score even once in finishing bottom of a group including Japan, Honduras and Morocco. Nor could Luis Suarez or Edinson Cavani trouble the scorers with Uruguay as they exited a group topped by Stuart Pearce's Great Britain, who, in their first Olympic appearance since 1960, lost in the last eight to South Korea. If only they'd picked David Beckham...

GB's women went out to John Herdman's Canada at the same stage, in a tournament that featured an unfortunate gaffe when the South Korean flag was accidentally used for North Korea's game against Colombia. Luckily North Korea are an easy-going bunch and it didn't upset them *at all*, and they absolutely didn't protest so furiously that kick-off had to be delayed by an hour.

That's Olympic football for you: always on the verge of some international incident.

ARNE

REPLACING KLOPP, INSPIRED BY PEP

SLOT

Liverpool's new boss is one of a growing band of Guardiola disciples at Europe's top clubs, even if the duo have never worked together, nor even faced each other. Tasked with stepping into a legend's huge shoes at Anfield, the Dutchman wants to make his mark on English football… just like his idol



Words Chris Flanagan
Additional reporting Andy McGrath

Arne Slot was 18 hours from one of the biggest disappointments of his career when a match took place that would inspire him.

In May 2011, while Jurgen Klopp was celebrating his first Bundesliga title with Borussia Dortmund, Slot played in midfield as FC Zwolle lost a play-off to VVV-Venlo, denying them promotion to the Dutch top flight on that sad Sunday afternoon. The previous evening, however, the 32-year-old had seen the example that he was determined to follow. Barcelona had beaten Manchester United 3-1 at Wembley with the greatest performance ever delivered in a Champions League final, engineered by Slot's biggest coaching idol: Pep Guardiola.

"In the past 20 years, there has been one person who stands above others," declared Slot in 2022. "He has inspired lots of coaches. What he does is so incredibly clever, and so beautiful for football, too. Guardiola will still be talked about in 50 years."

Now, the disciple has arrived to take on the messiah. Slot's Liverpool will attempt to wrestle the Premier League title back from Manchester City, using Klopp's players, and guided by some of Guardiola's teachings.

A COACH IN THE MAKING

Guardiola won the European Cup as a player, with Barcelona. Slot did not hit such heights.

Hailing from the village of Bergentheim, a couple of miles from the German border, the Dutchman joined nearby Zwolle as a teenager for the first of two spells at the club. Sporting flowing locks back then, he showed potential as an attacking midfielder.

"Their coach was a friend of mine, Jan Everse, and he told me that he was a very good player but a player with his own opinion, who knew better than the coach," Martijn Krabbendam, of respected Dutch magazine *Voetbal International*, tells *FourFourTwo*. "He was very technical, but Jan felt that he had to work harder and run more. Later he was at NAC Breda, where Henk ten Cate said the same thing."

Slot joined NAC in 2002, having become Zwolle's leading goalscorer when they won promotion to the top tier. "Arne thought he was good – he had no doubts about his own qualities," said Everse. "But you shouldn't expect sliding tackles from him."

His new team, NAC, aspired to compete at the top end of the Eredivisie. They finished fourth in his first season there, leading to the only two European appearances of his career: a 6-0 aggregate loss to Bobby Robson's Newcastle in the UEFA Cup. From there, the club hit financial problems. Slot moved to Sparta Rotterdam, then back to Zwolle with Everse in the second tier.

After play-off defeat to VVV in 2011, he did help the club back into the Eredivisie again a year later, continuing for one more season before retiring aged 34. On the final day of the 2012-13 campaign, a now-bald Slot received a hero's reception as he came on for the last minute of a home match against ADO Den Haag, to make his 330th and final appearance for Zwolle. The cheers were even louder when he used that minute to nutmeg an opponent, displaying his skills for one last time.

Already, he had been showing signs of having a future in management. "Arne was constantly working on the boys during training – he was a coach in the making," said team-mate Bram van Polen.

"I got the impression that Slot watched Barcelona day and night," explained former Rangers defender Bert Konterman, who was











"HE'S A GREAT COMMUNICATOR, USING PRESS CONFERENCES TO EXPLAIN WHAT HE IS DOING"

on Zwolle's staff. "He'd watch their positional play, or the way they did things for free-kicks. He would arrive at the club the next morning so excited by what he had seen."

Slot spent a year coaching in Zwolle's youth system while gleaning whatever knowledge he could from people in the game. "He came to my house in the Netherlands to speak to me about football," revealed Pep Lijnders, now Red Bull Salzburg boss but until recently Jurgen Klopp's long-serving assistant at Liverpool, having previously worked there under Brendan Rodgers (and, before that, at Porto for eight years). "He drove for a long time to see me, and he had a thousand questions. I attempted to answer them all."

Slot soon joined the first-team staff at Cambuur, where he would link up with future Ajax boss Marcel Keizer. Although the pair couldn't prevent Cambuur from dropping out of the Eredivisie, they shared ideas that stood Slot in good stead. "They made a database of things they saw in football – set pieces, counter-attacks, ways of playing," says Krabbendam. "Guardiola was Slot's favourite, but he admired Marcelo Bielsa, too."

When Keizer left to take charge of Ajax's second team and replacement Rob Maas was fired after a slow start in the second tier, Slot was appointed interim boss, together with fellow coach Sipke Hulshoff. The pair quickly revived the team's fortunes, guiding them from 14th to third, narrowly missing out on promotion. They also led Cambuur to a shock KNVB Cup triumph over Ajax, reaching the semi-finals for the first time in the club's history, only falling to AZ Alkmaar on penalties.

AZ were so impressed that they hired Slot as assistant. Two years later, in the summer of 2019, John van den Brom departed and Slot stepped up to become their head coach. He didn't need long to make an impact.

The 2019-20 season was a remarkable one for many reasons. Just one league game into the campaign, the roof fell in. Literally. High winds caused the structural collapse at AZ's AFAS Stadion, doing such damage that the club were unable to play at home for four months, moving 45 miles down the coast to The Hague on the other side of Amsterdam.

AZ drew with Manchester United there in the Europa League, but a paltry 4,689 supporters travelled to watch them take on FC Twente in a league match – just a third of the crowd that had seen them thrash Fortuna Sittard in their opening game of the season in Alkmaar. Undeterred, an AZ team that hadn't finished in the top two of the Eredivisie for 11 years gathered such momentum that they were soon making a surprise challenge for the title against Erik ten Hag's Ajax, Champions League semi-finalists in the previous season.

Ajax's six-point lead was reduced to zero when Slot masterminded a 2-0 win at the Johan Cruyff Arena in early March. Then COVID-19 hit and the season was halted with just nine fixtures remaining. It never resumed, and although no league title was officially awarded that season, the record books say Ajax led on goal difference. "Slot is still convinced that he would have been champion that year," reveals Krabbendam. "What he did was impressive."

THE 10-MONTH COMEBACK TOUR

Feyenoord were among the many who were indeed impressed. In December 2020, after AZ had won at Napoli in the Europa League, they held secret talks to install Slot as their manager at the end of the campaign. The Rotterdam club had been drifting, and would finish a disappointing fifth that season.

When AZ learned of Slot's clandestine agreement, they were furious and fired him immediately. "The upside was that he had six months to watch Feyenoord and see what he thought they needed," says Krabbendam. "He told me he was like a scout during those months, watching games, looking at players. Then, from the moment he arrived at the club, everything changed.

"We were at their training camp in Austria and he brought a totally different atmosphere and mindset. He wanted a high press. It was like he was projecting Feyenoord into the 22nd century. It was also the feeling he gave people, and the way he spoke about football in general.

"Slot is a great communicator. His press conferences aren't just something he has to do; he uses them to influence people, to explain what he's doing. Sometimes it felt like we were at college – he would talk for 35 minutes and go through things, with a sense of humour as well. He's always very happy, always smiling. He's the best coach I've ever worked with as a journalist." ▸

Above Mid-90s Slot with a very mid-90s haircut **Left** Brushing past Steven Pienaar at Ajax **Far left** Slot signed off in style... sort of **Below left** Beware: adverse Cambuur ahead

Slot's high-pressing game required his players to run a lot – to the amusement of his former team-mates, who knew he wasn't so keen himself on running in his playing days. "He wants his boys to be fit – I don't know if he ever saw the inside of a weights room as a player!" chuckled Bram van Polen.

When Slot taught pressing strategies to his players, videos of Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool were often used as an example. "He used to show us clips of Liverpool all the time," said American midfielder Cole Bassett, who was at Feyenoord during Slot's first season in charge. "They were the team he used to emphasise to us: if we wanted to play at the top level, that's what you had to do."

Feyenoord beat Atletico Madrid in Slot's first pre-season, irking Diego Simeone so much that the Argentine shoved him after the final whistle. With Robin van Persie among the backroom staff, the club finished that campaign a much-improved third in the Eredivisie. The real story, though, was their epic journey from Pristina to Tirana – 115 miles as the crow flies, but a 10-month adventure that took them to the final of the new Europa Conference League and put the club back on the map.

Feyenoord hadn't progressed past the last 32 of any European competition since they'd won the UEFA Cup at their home ground in 2002. Slot's side scored 43 goals in the competition and fans fell in love with their team again, following them across the continent in huge numbers.

When the Conference League was devised, some had questioned whether it would bring any real value for clubs. Slot's Feyenoord instantly proved them wrong... even if they were 23 minutes from being eliminated in their very first qualifying fixture, back in July.

"Against Drita from Kosovo, they drew 0-0 away, then they were losing at home, to this team no one had heard of," remembers Krabbendam. "Everyone thought, 'Well, this new coach talks a lot but maybe nothing is going to change'. But they won, Slot got the new players he wanted – only two, in Alireza Jahanbakhsh and Gernot Trauner – and the train began to run all the way to the final.

"Everyone started to look at Feyenoord again and consider them a very important club. He gave supporters their confidence back. They were happy and proud to go to matches – that hadn't been there for several years. Not only were they winning, but they were playing attractive, attacking football."



"IT'LL BE TOUGH AT LIVERPOOL. IT'S VERY DIFFICULT TO FOLLOW THE LORD MAYOR'S SHOW"

Ultimately, Feyenoord lost the showpiece in Albania 1-0 to Jose Mourinho's Roma, some 308 days after their campaign had begun in Kosovo. That summer, several stars left. Tyrell Malacia was sold to Manchester United, Marcos Senesi to Bournemouth and Luis Sinisterra to Leeds, while Conference League top scorer Cyriel Dessers departed at the end of his loan deal.

Despite that, Feyenoord carried their momentum into the 2022-23 campaign and surged to the Eredivisie title with just two defeats all season – one when the league was already won. Thirteen consecutive victories sealed the deal, including a first win in 18 years away at bitter rivals Ajax. Having stepped up to the Europa League, they hammered Shakhtar Donetsk 7-1 at De Kuip, before running into Mourinho's Roma again in the quarter-finals.

Named Dutch manager of the year for a second successive season, Slot attracted interest from Tottenham at the end of the campaign but instead signed a new contract. Spurs weren't in the Champions League; Feyenoord were. They beat Celtic and Lazio in the group stage, then dropped into the Europa League and succumbed to Roma for a third successive season, this time without Mourinho. (Fear not, Liverpool fans: it isn't possible for Slot to face Roma in 2024-25.)

In the domestic league, Feyenoord came second, but actually accumulated more points than they had in the previous season – a club-record 84, up from 82 – as well as scoring more goals and conceding fewer of them. They beat Ajax 4-0 away – a result so humiliating for the losers that crowd trouble forced the match to be abandoned, and finished three days later – then 6-0 at home. It was Ajax's worst ever Eredivisie defeat.

Feyenoord were denied a second successive league title only by a freak season from PSV, who accrued an Eredivisie record of 91 points from their 34 games. Two days before the final match of the campaign, an emotional farewell at home to Excelsior, Slot confirmed that he had accepted an offer to replace Klopp at Liverpool.

"People were crying at his last match," recalls Krabbendam. "But everyone thought, 'It's Liverpool – we understand'. Feyenoord feel connected with Liverpool: they both sing *You'll Never Walk Alone* and the mentality is a little bit the same.

"The biggest prize Slot won at Feyenoord wasn't the championship; it was changing

Above Adding the 2024 KNVB Cup to his 2023 league title with Feyenoord **Below** Arne's at the wheel... no, wait, that's the trophy



THE NETHERLANDS NINE

Oranjeboom, or Oranjebust? None of Slot's countrymen have ended a Premier League campaign any higher than third place

MANAGER	BEST FINISH
Guus Hiddink (Chelsea)	3rd
Erik ten Hag (Manchester United)	3rd
Louis van Gaal (Manchester United)	4th
Martin Jol (Tottenham)	5th
Ruud Gullit (Chelsea)	6th
Ronald Koeman (Southampton)	6th
Dick Advocaat (Sunderland)	16th
Frank de Boer (Crystal Palace)	DNF
Rene Meulensteen (Fulham)	DNF



the whole identity of the club in three years. I had never seen that before. The club didn't have the most money nor the best players, but they had the best coach.

"I live near Rotterdam, and a few years ago, children would support Ajax because they were winning everything. Now, so many are fans of Feyenoord."

FOLLOW THAT, ARNE

On the same afternoon that Slot was bidding farewell at Feyenoord, Jurgen Klopp was stood in the centre of the pitch at Anfield, saying goodbye to Liverpool after nine glorious years at the helm. Before his speech was over, he broke into song, encouraging the whole crowd to join in. "ARNE SLOT, NA NA, NA NA NA!" he sung, adapting the chant that fans had created for him and incorporating the name of his replacement.

It was Klopp's version of the "Your job is to stand by our new manager" speech that Sir Alex Ferguson had given at Old Trafford 11 years earlier, heralding David Moyes' arrival at Manchester United. On both occasions, it spelled out that the departing boss knew some fans needed convincing.

"When he made the crowd change his song to Arne Slot's, that was the moment that made me think, 'Oh my God'," lifelong Liverpool fan and TV presenter Colin Murray tells *FFT*. "It was the saddest thing. I was like, 'That… that's why you're irreplaceable'."

Moyes couldn't replace Ferguson with any success. Despite all of his achievements to date, Slot's task will be almost as difficult. How do you follow a manager like Klopp?

"It will be tough," says former Liverpool striker Michael Owen. "Unless Pep Guardiola had walked through the door, then it was always going to be a comedown from Jurgen Klopp. Sometimes it's very, very difficult to follow the Lord Mayor's Show. We've seen that in the past at Manchester United and at Arsenal. How do you succeed in that situation? Some of the most experienced, talented coaches on the planet, like Unai Emery, would love to know the answer.

"The biggest challenge is expectation. Demands are high, coming off the back of a fantastic decade – not just trophies but amazing nights and a great style of play. But Liverpool fans are very supportive. At certain clubs, fans will get on players' backs if the team isn't performing well – you'll never hear Liverpool fans do that. They're very loyal to their team and their manager. He has walked into a club that's in great health, too. They've got a very good team and brought a lot of the hierarchy back, like Michael Edwards. The structure behind the scenes looks strong."

Former Reds goalkeeper David James is sure that the club's hierarchy will have done their homework on Slot. "This is someone they will have had their eye on for a number of years," James confirms to *FFT*. "He would need to have the right personality traits, and it seems his personality is exactly what Liverpool will need.

"He's a different character to Jurgen, but he should galvanise the players – everything suggests he's a very decent bloke, so I don't think there'll be any rubbing people up the wrong way. Happy players produce happy football. There's a lot of experience in this Liverpool squad, and a lot of intelligent players who can take on board what Arne wants and try to better themselves."



Top Feyenoord and Liverpool supporters have a connection **Above** "Now, who wants to hear Metallica?"

Slot's credentials of managing to galvanise a passionate fanbase should also help the 45-year-old at Anfield. Klopp arrived on Merseyside having spent the previous seven years electrifying Borussia Dortmund supporters, providing him with the perfect template to succeed at Anfield.

Krabbendam believes that Liverpool's new manager is far more suited to succeed in England than fellow Dutchman Erik ten Hag, who could finish only eighth with Manchester United last term.

"Slot is much better because he can communicate with players and the media," explains the *Voetbal International* journalist. "I speak with my colleagues from other publications and we're laughing, reading the English media saying, 'It'll be difficult – who is Slot?' They don't know what a wonderful manager they've signed. Yes, it's difficult to succeed a coach like Klopp, but if anyone can, it's Slot – I'm 100 per cent sure. This coach is too good not to succeed at Liverpool.

"The way he plays will be a bit different: Slot plays a possession game, more like Guardiola, but there's still going to be a lot of energy, a lot of running. Maybe he'll need a bit of time to get things running, but when everything is settled, he can definitely win the Premier League."

The Reds faded to third in Klopp's final season and James thinks there is actually headroom for improvement, despite the German's successes at Anfield.

"There are big shoes to fill, yes," admits James. "But Manchester City have won four titles in a row – they've been the dominant force – so Slot has an opportunity to do something that Jurgen didn't do. Look at Carlo Ancelotti at Real Madrid: when he went back there, he had to continue success for Real Madrid, rather than put them in a better position. After one league title in 34 seasons, there's an opportunity for Slot to put a stamp on the club that even Jurgen was unable to do, by winning two Premier Leagues – not that it will be easy.

"Last season, it seemed that some injuries Liverpool suffered were 'avoidable' – muscle injuries. If he can keep the squad fit, then quality-wise they haven't got a problem."

Owen doesn't necessarily expect the title straight away, but does hope to see positive indications. "Quite early on, we'll see the style of play and how exciting it is," he says. "In the long term, they must be competitive. It's all right giving managers time, but he walks in with a very good squad already, so if they came fifth and didn't win a trophy, they can't say it's just building blocks. The building blocks have already been put in place.

"Winning something in the first season would be perfect, but if they don't, they've got to be challenging. Then, long term, he has to play attractive football and win titles. The icing on the cake would be to integrate himself with the city, with the people, like Jurgen did. But you can't think, 'Let's do it exactly the same way as Jurgen'. Nobody can do it that way."

It's a message echoed by another successful former Liverpool manager. "My biggest advice is to understand the culture of the club and the city – but he must be himself," Rafa Benitez said recently.

If Slot's hero, Guardiola, will be talked about in 50 years, so will Klopp and Benitez in Liverpool. It won't be easy – far from it – but the Dutchman wants to join that list.

Owen was speaking courtesy of AceOdds

“I WAS REJECTED NINE TIMES AS A YOUNGSTER... THEN I FOUND MYSELF WINNING THE WORLD CUP AGAIN, WITH PELE HANDING ME THE TROPHY. I COULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED IT”

Only one man has played in three consecutive World Cup finals – and Cafu won two of them. The iconic Brazilian shares his outstanding career with *FourFourTwo*, including the time he almost joined Chelsea

Words Marcus Alves




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Cafu couldn't believe his ears. He had just been introduced at half-time by Carlo Ancelotti to play his final 45 minutes in a Milan shirt, as he bid farewell to Rossoneri supporters in May 2008 following five seasons at San Siro. It was then that he heard the question that still shocks him to this day.

"What are you smiling about?" referee Roberto Rosetti asked, while showing the veteran right-back a yellow card during Milan's 4-1 win over Udinese. It took a few seconds for Cafu to fully understand what had confused Rosetti – after all, a broad smile had been his trademark during his stunning career. He once said that if it were up to him, he would live on a football pitch.

"Without a smile, I'm a dead man," the 54-year-old tells *FourFourTwo* today. "You'd never see me without a smile during a game, not even if an official made a wrong penalty call. There are several ways to convince them to reconsider a decision. You can complain, you can swear, you can be aggressive, but you'll only annoy them by behaving like that.

"I can tell you that I probably deserved to be yellow-carded way more than I was for some of the fouls I did, but I wasn't because I had a smile on my face.

"A smile goes a long way."

THE GALACTICO THAT NEVER WAS

Cafu certainly had plenty to smile about in his playing days. Not in his wildest dreams did he ever think he would leave Jardim Irene – a favela in Sao Paulo where, at one point, he lived in a single-bedroom house with his parents and five siblings – to conquer the world and have a red carpet to walk on wherever he travels. He overcame many a failed trial to find a club in his formative years, before becoming arguably the best right-back of all-time.

He can only chuckle when asked how he feels when people call him that. "It makes me happy," Cafu explains. "It's impossible to translate into words how proud and honoured I feel when I get that kind of recognition, especially when you bear in mind that Brazil alone – and I'm not even bringing names from other countries to the table – had legends such as Carlos Alberto, Leandro and Jorginho playing in my position in the past. It blows my mind.

"But, in truth, do you know why it feels like this? Because, honestly, I never thought I would achieve everything that I achieved during my career. I pictured myself becoming a footballer, yes, winning trophies with my club, getting to the national team, playing in a World Cup and bringing it home.

"All of that, I pictured myself doing. But if you'd asked me if I could imagine becoming the only man in history to have played in three consecutive finals? No, I couldn't. Or wearing the captain's armband and lifting the 2002 trophy? No, I couldn't. Or being Brazil's most-capped player ever? No, I couldn't. Or featuring in 20 World Cup games? Again: no, I couldn't. I didn't plan any of that. It all happened naturally."

There's no way that Cafu could have planned it when he found himself approaching 18 years old and still playing Sunday football with cameramen and other employees from one of Brazil's largest television networks, Bandeirantes, every weekend. It was in one of those games, however, that he got himself on the radar of a third-tier side called Itaquaquecetuba. He ended up signing for them, then a while afterwards came a turning point in his life, as they were invited to play a friendly against Sao Paulo's youth team.

Sao Paulo had already been rejected Cafu at three trials, so he knew it could be his last chance to impress them. And that he did, receiving an offer at the final whistle to spend a month training with them, before they made a decision on whether they wanted to keep him at the club. Such was the pressure of the whole situation, he didn't even tell his parents about it until he was finally approved and could start a new chapter in his career.

"I don't hold a grudge against anyone for saying 'no' in the past," Cafu recalls. "What happened, happened, and that's it. It's not easy to be told at such a young age that you're being released for your own good, but it makes you stronger. My only reaction was to say 'Thank you' and leave. I never really got angry and reacted in a way that I would regret afterwards.

"I always believed in my potential because I knew that, in football, not always the best stood out, but instead the most dedicated and disciplined one – the professional athlete in the true sense of the term, and not a mere footballer. If you asked me to cross 15 balls, I'd cross them with a smile on my face, as happy as I could be, because that would help to improve my game.

"That was the mentality that Tele Santana demanded from you at Sao Paulo. He was one of the most annoying managers you could have, but in a good way. He was annoying with those who had potential and could do more. I always told the other boys that the day he stopped nagging you, then something would be wrong. I always listened to his advice."

Under the legendary coach, who had previously led Brazil's memorable 1982 World Cup side, Cafu won it all at Sao Paulo, including the Brazilian league, the Copa Libertadores twice and the Intercontinental Cup twice. It was also at this time that he had a career-changing moment, switching from the right side of midfield to right-back due to an other player's injury.

Although he wasn't too excited about it at first, that decision would soon pay off. The 20-year-old was called up by the national team for the first time and was strongly





Above Yes, Cafu was young once
Above right The clothing brand, Makakooo, was launched with the mission of fighting racism across the globe



linked to Real Madrid. The Spanish giants even travelled to Brazil to secure his signature but had to return home empty-handed, much to the dismay of Cafu.

"I could have played for Real Madrid," he explains. "We had several meetings, but Sao Paulo were preparing for the Intercontinental Cup and refused to let me go, arguing that I was a key piece for the team. Of course I was flattered to hear that, but at the same time, it was Real Madrid – you don't know if they're coming for you twice, right? I wish I could have played for them.

"So what did they do? As they couldn't return without a full-back, they signed another player on loan – Vitor – but told Sao Paulo that Vitor wouldn't stay there long and that they'd take me when he returned. Unfortunately, things worked out differently."

Despite the frustration, Cafu remained focused, shining for Sao Paulo the same way he had always done and being crowned South America's best player in 1994. That same year, he fulfilled his dream of being picked for the Brazil squad for the World Cup. He was supposed to only be a back-up option to his idol, Jorginho, but in the final against Italy, the Bayern Munich right-back felt discomfort early in the first half and had to be replaced. Selecao boss Carlos Alberto Parreira immediately called for Cafu.

"When Jorginho put his hand on his thigh for the first time," Cafu recalls now, "Parreira turned to the bench and asked, 'Cafu, are you ready?' I need you to warm up'. I was like, 'I'm already warmed up'. I had been training, waiting for this chance, for 32 days.

"For someone who assumed that they were going to the World Cup only to gain experience, to all of a sudden have the opportunity to play on such a stage, and replace the man you admired, was a lot to process. I've always respected the hierarchy; I knew that was Jorginho's moment. But I knew that when my moment came, I wouldn't let anyone steal it from me. That was the beginning for me."

IL PENDOLINO ON THE MOVE

After winning the final via a penalty shoot-out, Cafu headed back to Sao Paulo, then finally left for Europe in the winter to join Real Zaragoza. He arrived in Spain as a World Cup winner but struggled to get the expected minutes, partly because of the competition provided by local hero Alberto Belsue, and also because of the three foreigners limit. Surprisingly, Cafu lasted just six months there and returned to Brazil to sign for Juventude, then Palmeiras – both clubs owned by the Parmalat company.

It would take another couple of seasons for Cafu to have a second taste of European football, with no looking back this time. He hit the ground running for Roma despite arriving relatively late in his career, aged 27, and not knowing a single word in Italian prior to the move. The Giallorossi played their part.

"They could have put me with Aldair to share a room, but instead they placed me with [Georgia-born Russia international] Omari Tetradze," Cafu explains. "We would spend 24 hours looking at each other and watching games, unable to have any kind of conversation. That was some experience. But it encouraged me to learn the language way faster and feel much more at home." ▶



Left Cracking away kit, even better player **Right** USA 94, when Ronaldo was Ronaldinho **Below right** Sao Paulo moving Cafu to full-back worked out well





"IN THE USA 94 FINAL, PARREIRA SAID, 'WARM UP'. I ALREADY WAS. I'D BEEN WAITING FOR THIS"

Such was the full-back's impact in the Eternal City, he earned the nickname *Il Pendolino* ('The Express Train') from fans for his runs down the right flank. He'd reach the peak of his six seasons there in 2000-01 when he helped Roma to win only their third Serie A title, and their first in 18 years.

"Our team was amazing – truly incredible," he tells *FFT*. "We had Gabriel Batistuta, Vincenzo Montella and Marco Delvecchio in attack, Francesco Totti and Marcos Assuncao in midfield, plus Aldair, Zago, Walter Samuel and Vincent Candela at the back. There was so much talent everywhere.

"But we had to beat other sensational sides. Serie A was arguably the best league in Europe then. The main favourites were Milan, Juventus, Lazio, Parma and Inter. After winning the first five games, however, we said in the dressing room, 'We might have a shot at winning this'. And we did. That was really special."

At the end of the season, his fourth in Italy, Cafu had an important decision to make: stay at Roma or accept an offer from Chelsea. As tempted as the Brazilian was by a move to Stamford Bridge, Roma president Franco Sensi didn't allow him to join Frank Lampard, William Gallas, Emmanuel Petit and Boudewijn Zenden in being recruited by Claudio Ranieri that summer.

"Chelsea made an official approach, but Sensi told them, 'Forget about it – nobody takes our boys from here and we are going to keep this team for a long time'," Cafu recalls. "He used to say that we were all his children. It would have been a nice experience to play in the Premier League – in 2001 it was already one of the biggest leagues at the time – but we couldn't reach a deal.

"I still follow it and I love watching Kevin De Bruyne – he plays with such ease, it's impressive. I'm a Liverpool fan, though. I've visited the club a few times and I enjoy their history, their stadium atmosphere, their songs. I even got the chance to meet Jon Flanagan, who was dubbed 'the next Cafu', and we took a picture together. I still remember that day."

"HOLD YOUR HORSES, PELE"

Cafu was no longer the inexperienced boy from the 1994 World Cup who couldn't thrive at Zaragoza and returned home at the earliest opportunity. He was one of the world's best full-backs, and a leader for a Brazil side who reached the World Cup final again in 1998, then another in 2002.

"I was a different footballer," he agrees. "It's one thing to be a substitute for your national team: you do your best in a game and if it works, OK, and if it doesn't, you're not the starter anyway. You return to the bench for the next match and that's it. But to have the status of an undisputed starter, as I had in 1998, is a much bigger responsibility.

"That year, we reached another World Cup final, but couldn't win it against France. I wouldn't say it was frustrating, though, because that would have been getting kicked out in the group stage or the last 16.





"I could offer you a series of excuses for that defeat – Ronaldo feeling sick, having a convulsion, an epileptic fit, how it made the team nervous and unable to play the same way – but we have to remember that we faced a difficult opponent who had their best performance of the tournament that day, while we had our worst. Unfortunately, we conceded three goals the way we did: two one of them from dead balls, both scored from Zinedine Zidane, who had never scored a header in his career.

"When we arrived back in Brazil, the fans acknowledged our efforts and supported us. It was a totally different mood compared to the one we had when we left for Japan and South Korea in 2002. We were not a kind-of discredited team by the Brazilian people, but a totally discredited one. If anyone comes to me now and tells me they believed in us, I'll answer right away: 'You're lying.' No one believed in us. We had qualified only in the last game, amid giant pressure.

"But the captain's role is to reverse situations like that. I told everyone, 'I have been here before and there's only one way to bring the fans back to our side: by winning our first match at the tournament. If you fail to do that, they'll be saying, 'See, I told you so!' So, that first game was key for us. We had to find a way to win – and we did."

Despite some Rivaldo-based drama in that opener against Turkey, Brazil progressed to the quarter-finals to face England. Winning all four previous games, and scoring 13 goals in the process, meant Selecao supporters were by their side once again. Coming from behind to secure a place in the semi-finals after Michael Owen's opening goal was some test for Cafu and his team-mates, however.

"Ronaldinho's free-kick is naturally mentioned when we discuss that day," he recalls, "but, for me, one of the crucial moments happened before that in the first half, when Lucio failed to control a ball and Owen scored. We couldn't afford to lose Lucio, so our job was to bring him back to his best. We kept telling him, 'We need you; we are here with you; don't let your head drop, forget about the goal as it's already in the past; we have the entire game to win this but we can only do it if you're well, brother, so let's go together'. It all worked out. That made me believe we could win the title."

Beating Germany in the final remains Cafu's favourite memory, along with lifting the trophy the way he did – by climbing onto a small glass podium while precariously wearing his studs, assisted by Pele.

"Did you see what I did?" the legendary No.2 laughs. "I told Pele to wait to give me the trophy. That was *Pele*, man... even my father spoke to me about it. But I was blind – I climbed on the podium and could have cracked it with my boots, but I didn't care, I wasn't really thinking it through. That's the only explanation for asking Pele to wait. I was just too excited!

"To have been rejected in nine trials early in my career, hearing people say that I would never become a footballer, and find myself in that moment, winning the World Cup again and having Pele handing me the trophy – that was just too much. It felt like I didn't need anything else in life."

As a two-time World Cup winner, Cafu was welcomed back at Roma but then, having been told that the club wanted to focus on younger players from the following season onwards, he decided to return to the place that had made him the happiest: Japan, the venue of that 2002 World Cup win.

JAPAN OR MILAN?

Cafu had agreed a pre-contract to join Yokohama F Marinos in mid-2003. Then something he hadn't envisaged happened.

"I was definitely moving to Japan – I had already received part of the money and everything was ready," Cafu admits. "But then Leonardo called me to say that Ariedo Braida [Milan's sporting director] needed to speak with me. I thought, 'They might want to ask me about some player'. I met them in Rome and Leo told me, 'Carlo Ancelotti wants you'. I said, 'But I'm 32, Leo'. He



"WHEN ANCELOTTI TOLD ME TO REST, I FOUGHT WITH HIM, SAYING, 'I DON'T NEED TO REST – I'M NOT OLD YET'"

insisted. He said, 'Ancelotti wants you and Adriano Galliani already said that they don't accept "no" as an answer'. I was surprised. I said, 'Are you sure about this? Don't you prefer a younger player?' But they were really persistent, saying, 'No, no, Ancelotti wants you to play at least 12 games a season'.

"I thought to myself, 'I'm not going there to play only 12 times a year, but let's see what happens.' I warned them about my Yokohama situation and told them that if they were serious about the offer, I would call Yokohama, explain the whole thing, apologise and send their money back. I went to the bank that same afternoon and, less than 24 hours later, the reimbursement was with them. I was 32 and this was Milan – it was almost impossible to reject.

"I ended up spending five years with them, playing nearly every game in four. When Ancelotti told me to rest, I fought with him, saying, 'I don't need to rest – I'm not old yet'. I played the same way I'd always done."

"I was a bold type of full-back, who wasn't afraid of playing, dribbling, defending,

Top left Cafu was part of a very, very, *very* good Roma side **Left** Just out of shot, Cafu is kicking Pele off the podium **Above** Lifting the Champions League trophy in 2007 with Milan meant he had won everything there was to win

hearing what the press would say. I was never afraid of playing. I've always said, 'I'll impose my rhythm, and that's that'. Lots of people used to say I didn't mark players, but you hardly ever saw someone scoring on my back. Sometimes, you'd hear a coach telling the two full-backs not to attack and I was like, 'Are you staying behind, Roberto Carlos?' He'd say, 'Of course not'. I'd say, 'And neither will I'. You have three centre-backs and two defensive midfielders, so what's the point of doing that? I read the game very well, though, so I knew when to go forward."

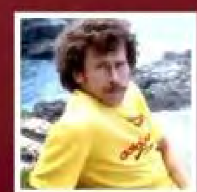
So why Brazil don't produce world-class full-backs any more? "Because instead of bringing our creativity to European football, we're just copying them," Cafu says. "People used to come to Brazil and Argentina all of the time, looking for players, because of our talent, our dribbling, our capacity to do the unthinkable, our joy of playing football. Now we want to be like Europe. That's why we find ourselves at a lower level in recent years."

The two-time world champion, once described by Alex Ferguson as having 'two hearts', retired in 2008, signing off against Udinese with that aforementioned booking and a rare goal. He remains an omnipresent figure in football through numerous projects, the latest being Makakooo, a clothing brand launched with the mission of fighting racism in Brazil and around the world. *Macaco* is the Portuguese word for monkey.

"Thankfully I've never suffered racism in football, but the issue is there and it's up to us to do something about it," Cafu explains. "That's a matter of education. A child isn't born a racist, saying people are different from others – they repeat what they hear.

"That's a society problem, but what happens in a stadium has 10 times bigger repercussions. We have a voice that is respected in football, so with this brand our goal is to say 'no' to racism and show we're all equals. Fifteen per cent of our sales will be donated to organisations in Brazil, Colombia and Ghana."

It's a small step that can allow everyone to do what Cafu enjoyed doing the most throughout his remarkable career. Smile.



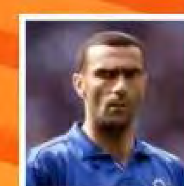










30 GREATEST FULL-BACKS EVER

FFT ranks the finest to step foot on Planet Football, via Jon Flanagan superfans, raw chickens and a magic dwarf

Words Tom Hancock













30 MANUEL AMOROS

A European champion for club and country, Amoros won Euro 1984 with France and the 1992/93 Champions League with Marseille. Born to Spanish parents who had escaped the regime of Francisco Franco, Amoros was among his era's best right-backs, earning 82 caps for Les Bleus in all, scoring once. **WEIRDEST MOMENT** Responding to a rough tackle from Jesper Olsen at Euro '84 by kicking the ball at him – then nutting him.

29 JOSIMAR

Selected in FIFA's 1986 World Cup All-Star Team, Brazilian right-back Josimar only won 16 caps yet established himself among the planet's premier right-backs during the '80s. Incredibly, he made his debut in Mexico and scored in each of his first two internationals. **CAREER HIGHLIGHT** Doing what apparently comes naturally for Brazilian full-backs and bagging a belter at the World Cup – against Northern Ireland great Pat Jennings, no less.

Above left Josimar scored in each of his first two caps for Brazil... at the World Cup finals

28 ERIC ABIDAL

A league winner in France, Spain and Greece (of course), in addition to starting the 2006 World Cup Final, Abidal had a stunning career. He needed surgery on a liver tumour in 2011, yet won the Champions League two months later with Barcelona. After a transplant, he still managed to return to first-team action. **CAREER HIGHLIGHT** Hoisting the European Cup at Wembley following his initial surgery – captain Carles Puyol handed him the honour.

27 BRANDI CHASTAIN

An idol of the women's game, Chastain won 192 caps for the United States from 1988 to 2004. A highly versatile right-back who could also operate in midfield or up front, Chastain slammed home the winning spot-kick in the 1999 World Cup Final shootout against China. **CAREER HIGHLIGHT** After that penalty, she removed her shirt in celebration, making for what was later described as the "most iconic photograph ever taken of a female athlete".

26 DENIS IRWIN

The greatest full-back known by their middle name? Possibly. Perfectly competent on both flanks, (Joseph) Denis Irwin played a crucial role in Manchester United's '90s dominance. He won a dozen major titles at Old Trafford, including the Treble, and helped the Republic of Ireland reach the last 16 of USA '94 after a shock defeat of eventual runners-up Italy. **THEY SAID** "He would be the one certainty" – Sir Alex Ferguson on his all-time United XI.

25 GIANLUCA ZAMBROTTA

A World Cup winner in 2006, few moments summed up what the Italian was capable of better than his strike against Ukraine in the last eight – surging forward from right-back, then crashing home a left-footed 25-yarder. Adept on either wing, he won 100 caps, as well as Serie A titles with Juventus and Milan. **DID YOU KNOW?** The Como native went on to become manager of the mighty FC Chiasso of Switzerland, plus Delhi Dynamos in India.













Top right "I just really like skiing. Got a problem?"

24 MARCELO

Hoarder of a hefty 25 trophies at Real Madrid, including five Champions Leagues, left-back Marcelo is one of the most decorated players of all time – you don't do that unless you're half-decent. The fuzzy-haired Brazilian ended his Bernabeu spell by becoming the first non-Spaniard to wear the armband for 97 years. **DID YOU KNOW?** Marcelo never managed to win the World Cup but did make it into the team of the tournament in 2014 and 2018.

23 GARY NEVILLE

Before he was making alarming noises in the commentary box, Neville was one of the top right-backs around, scooping up trophy after trophy during 19 years at Manchester United. A Treble winner and club captain, the irritable defender accumulated 85 caps for England and was picked for five major tournaments. **HE SAID** "Shut up, ya f**king dick" – swatting away a prank caller, who claimed to have got his phone number from Tony Adams' son.

22 JORDI ALBA

A European champion for club and country, Alba has to go down as one of Barcelona and Spain's greatest ever defenders. Diminutive at 5ft 7in, the attacking left-back moved to the Camp Nou from Valencia in 2012 and racked up 459 outings, winning the Treble in 2015. **CAREER HIGHLIGHT** Legging it through to score Spain's second goal in their 4-0 rout of Italy in the Euro 2012 Final, three days after his Barça switch had been rubberstamped.

21 GIACINTO FACCHETTI

Key to the success of Helenio Herrera's fabled 'Grande Inter' team of the '60s, Facchetti was one of the first to master the attacking full-back role. A dominant presence on the left for Inter and Italy (he was a European champion with both), the one-club man came second in the voting for the 1965 Ballon d'Or behind some bloke called Eusebio, who wasn't bad. **WEIRDEST MOMENT** He was sent off once in his career, for sarcastically clapping a referee.

20 LUCY BRONZE

Arguably England's ultimate female player of all time, Bronze has enjoyed a trophy-laden career at club and international level. Born in Northumberland, the marauding right-back has bagged the Women's Champions League four times – thrice at Lyon, once at Barcelona – and tasted Euros glory with the Lionesses. **CAREER HIGHLIGHT** Rocking up to England's Euros parade in Trafalgar Square donning ski goggles (some suggest she was hungover...).

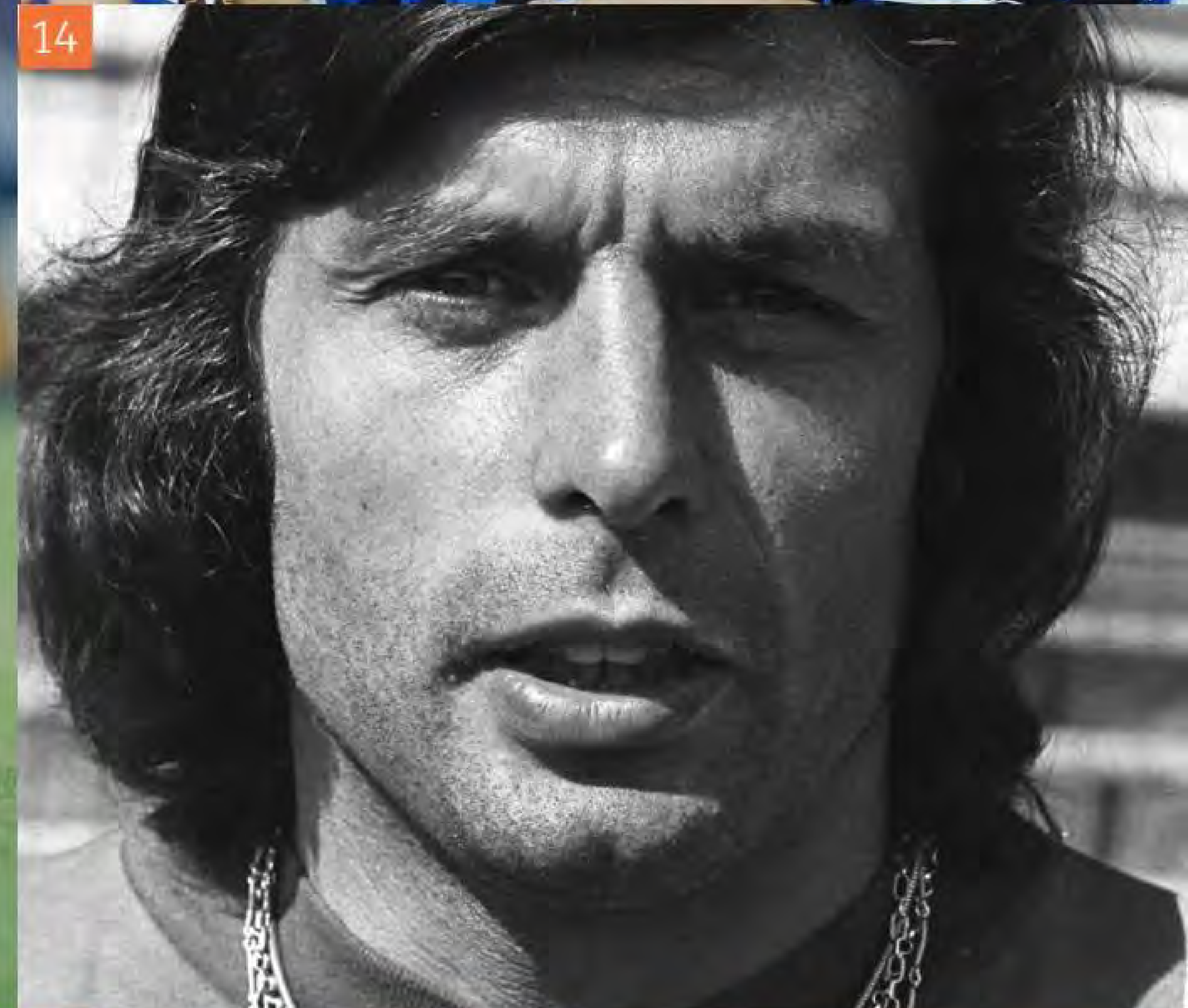
19 MANFRED KALTZ

What's your favourite German word? Ours is *Bananenflanken* – the fond name given to the curving crosses of Euro 1980-winning right-back Kaltz. Capped by West Germany on 69 occasions, he spent almost his entire career at Hamburg, where honours included three Bundesliga titles and the 1983 European Cup. **DID YOU KNOW?** His 581 Bundesliga outings is the second highest in the league's history, pipped by Eintracht Frankfurt's Charly Korbel.


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18 PATRICE EVRA

Perhaps the world's number one left-back at his peak, Evra reached five Champions League finals with Monaco, Juventus and Manchester United, where he also pocketed five Premier League titles. An 81-cap French international, he played as a winger early on in his career. **WEIRDEST MOMENT** Posting a bizarre video of himself kissing and sucking a raw chicken. "When I see it now, I think, 'What the hell?!'" he later admitted – you and us both, Patrice...

17 KELLEY O'HARA

Considered one of the finest defenders in the history of the women's game, O'Hara was an ever-present for the USA side that dominated the 2010s, winning 2012 Olympic gold and back-to-back World Cups in 2015 and 2019. An attacking right-back, she previously won the 2009 Hermann Trophy – an annual prize awarded to the leading college soccer player. **DID YOU KNOW?** Her off-pitch ventures have included advertising chocolate milk. Yummy.

Above (middle) Players took on Tassotti at their own risk, as Luis Enrique would discover

16 MAURO TASSOTTI

A Milan legend, Tassotti lined up in some of the most robust backlines the game has ever seen. Predominantly a right-back, and with monikers as disparate as 'The Professor' and 'The Badger', Tassotti guided the Rossoneri to European Cup glory in 1989, 1990 and '94. **DID YOU KNOW?** A month after celebrating a third European triumph, he was banned for eight games for elbowing Luis Enrique in the face at the World Cup. No prisoners taken...

15 JAVIER ZANETTI

While Zanetti did sometimes play in midfield, it was at full-back where he became revered and featured in many of his famous matches, such as Inter's 2009-10 Champions League semi-final elimination of Barcelona en route to the Treble. Recruited in 1995, the Argentine spent almost two decades in the Nerazzurri side and is currently serving as vice-president. **THEY SAID** "He was my toughest opponent" – Ryan Giggs on the South American stopper.

14 WIM SUURBIER

A rock at right-back as the Dutch established themselves as one of football's major forces in the '70s, Suurbier was a crucial cog in the 'Total Football' movement. A two-time World Cup runner-up, he spent 13 years with Ajax, guiding the Amsterdam giants to a hat-trick of European Cup final victories from 1971-73. **DID YOU KNOW?** Suurbier signed off across the pond, playing indoor football for Golden Bay Earthquakes and the Tampa Bay Rowdies.

13 HANS-PETER BRIEGEL

A teenage athletics star, Briegel could have been a long jumper or triple jumper; instead, he chose to be a left-back and didn't do too bad. The 1985 German Footballer of the Year won Euro 1980, then swapped Kaiserslautern for Verona where he helped Hellas to seal the Serie A title for the only time in their history. **DID YOU KNOW?** An intimidating opponent, Briegel was nicknamed 'The Steamroller' and didn't believe in wearing shinpads. Blimey.


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12 GIUSEPPE BERGOMI

Even as a youngster, Bergomi sported such an impressive moustache that he acquired the nickname '*Lo Zio*' ('The Uncle'). The defender spent his whole career with Inter – the 1982 World Cup winner was ranked by *The Times* as the ninth hardest player of all time. Feisty. **DID YOU KNOW?** He went to four World Cups but never played in a qualifier – he debuted before Spain '82, Italy were holders in '86 and hosts in '90, then he returned for France '98.

11 ANDREAS BREHME

The late Brehme scored the best part of 100 goals in his career but was a full-back for the most part. A two-time Bundesliga winner and Serie A champion at Inter, he's easily among the foremost players to hail from Germany. **CAREER HIGHLIGHT** Using his left foot to net a deflected free-kick against England in the 1990 World Cup semi-final, then his right foot to score the decisive penalty in the final. He finished third in that year's Ballon d'Or.

10 LILIAN THURAM

Speedy, studious, simply sublime – Thuram enjoyed a decorated career, lining up at right-back throughout France's triumphant 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 campaigns. He won 142 caps from 1994-2008 as well as bagging back-to-back Serie A crowns with Juventus. **CAREER HIGHLIGHT** His shock brace to seal victory in France's 1998 World Cup semi-final against Croatia – incredulously, they were the only two international goals he ever scored.

09 PAUL BREITNER

A scorer for West Germany in the 1974 World Cup Final before notching again in the 1982 showpiece, Breitner was named in Pele's FIFA 100 list of the greatest living players (though Pele ended up picking 125...). Also masterful in midfield, the left-back won a European Cup at Bayern Munich and La Liga at Real Madrid. **DID YOU KNOW?** Breitner was the only player to boycott the 1978 World Cup finals, due to it being staged in military-junta Argentina.

Top right
Breitner: big hair, and a man for a big game

08 DJALMA SANTOS

Few players can claim to have made 400-plus appearances for TWO clubs – but Santos did exactly that, for Sao Paulo outfits Portuguesa and Palmeiras. Brazil's right-back in the team that won consecutive World Cups in 1958 and 1962, Santos represented his nation 98 times and achieved the rare feat of making three different World Cup teams of the tournament. **DID YOU KNOW?** Considered an exemplar of sportsmanship, Santos was never dismissed.

07 RUUD KROL

Arguably the Netherlands' supreme defender, Krol collected 83 Oranje caps from 1969 to 1983. Suitably versatile for a mainstay of the Dutch's legendary 'Total Football' era, he was an integral member of the celebrated Ajax side that won three successive European Cup finals, to add to his six Eredivisie league titles. **DID YOU KNOW?** Krol opened a snack bar in Amsterdam with team-mate Arie Haan while the pair were still starring at De Meer Stadion.



06 ASHLEY COLE

England's finest full-back, Cole is also one of his country's most-capped players, totalling 107. Already a Premier League winner with Arsenal, Cole ruffled feathers by joining rivals Chelsea in 2006, then won another title and the Champions League. One of the few left-backs to give Cristiano Ronaldo a tough time. **WEIRDEST MOMENT** *That* Roma team photo, with Cole lurking to the side. Maybe he was hedging his bets in case Lazio came calling...

05 CAFU

Defending is serious business, but steadfast Brazilian legend Cafu always seemed to play with a smile on his face (winning the World Cup twice probably helped). An extraordinarily energetic presence down the right flank, he won Serie A at both Roma and Milan, as well as the Champions League with the Rossoneri. **WEIRDEST MOMENT** Being a Jon Flanagan superfan – the Liverpool full-back retired at 29 after stints with Charleroi and HB Koge.

Above Paolo picked up Ol' Big Ears five times, and he even lost three finals too

04 PHILIPP LAHM

It didn't matter where you played Germany's 2014 World Cup-winning skipper – right-back, left-back or even in midfield – he was always nothing short of elite. That applied whether he was representing his country – he netted the opening goal of the 2006 World Cup on home soil – or Bayern Munich, who he guided to the Treble under Jupp Heynckes in 2013. **DID YOU KNOW?** Standing at 5ft 7ins, Lahm was pretty harshly nicknamed 'Magic Dwarf'.

03 CARLOS ALBERTO

It remains one of the most illustrious strikes in World Cup history – Brazil's exquisite team move in the 1970 final against Italy – and it was fitting that Carlos Alberto finished it off. The flying full-back blasted home Pele's pass before raising the trophy aloft in Mexico. "It defined us to the rest of the world," he said. **DID YOU KNOW?** Inducted into the Brazilian Football Museum Hall of Fame, he went on to become manager of Oman and Azerbaijan...

02 ROBERTO CARLOS

Brazilian full-backs have a thing for scoring screamers, but none have ever done it with as much elan as Roberto Carlos. Le Tournoi against France in 1997 – need we say more? If that wasn't enough for you, he then hit 'the impossible goal' for Real Madrid at Tenerife a year later, from virtually on the byline. He was so much more than any old left-back. **THEY SAID** "He can cover the entire wing all on his own" – Real boss Vicente del Bosque.

01 PAOLO MALDINI

Did you know that Paolo Maldini means full-back in Italian? OK it doesn't, but it should do – Il Capitano became a legend, largely at left-back, despite being naturally right-footed and starting his career on the opposite flank. The ultimate one-club man, he played 902 times for Milan, winning just the five European Cups. **THEY SAID** "You needed to put together 15 players to make one like him" – Roberto Baggio. There can be no higher compliment.



"MICHEL PLATINI SAID THAT IF GLENN HODDLE AND I HAD BEEN FRENCH, WE WOULD HAVE BOTH EARNED 100 CAPS"



From sausage seasoner to European Cup finalist with Marseille, Chris Waddle went from obscure factory worker to football's elite. He tells *FFT* how, via backheels, ballads and a ballistic Jack Charlton

Words John Richardson

Chris Waddle lined up for Marseille at the Stadio San Nicola in Bari for the 1991 European Cup Final as one of the world's finest footballers. A fluid winger of rare laconic grace, Waddle was also in Italy a year earlier for a World Cup semi-final – *that* night in Turin with a never-to-be-forgotten personal finale. Twelve months before that, he'd left Tottenham for Provence as the third most expensive player in history.

Today, such a talent would have advanced through an academy system from the age of six: honed, developed, nurtured into a multi-million-pound asset. Yet at the beginning of Waddle's stellar career, he was earning £3 a week at Tow Law Town in County Durham, combining his non-league duties with a job at a sausage factory.

"I'd been feeling a bit sorry for myself after failing to get an apprenticeship at Coventry," ▸



Waddle tells *FourFourTwo* now. "I didn't know what to do. I thought I was nailed on to be taken on, but it didn't work out. My parents said to me, 'You're not going to sit around on your arse all day doing nothing. Get yourself a job'. I went for a few interviews and ended up seasoning sausages in a factory."

To begin with, even Tow Law – a Northern League team from a tiny hilltop town of just 2,000 people on the edge of the Pennines – was a step up for him. Waddle first turned out for Clarke Chapmans, an engineering firm whose ground was across the road from Gateshead International Stadium.

"I only had the last half of the season with them, and I asked the manager if he knew anyone who'd give me a game in non-league on a Saturday," continues the 62-year-old. "He said he knew a guy called Billy Bell, who was the boss of Tow Law Town. I didn't have a clue where Tow Law was.

"Because the majority of the players were from Newcastle, they trained in the city, in Jesmond. It was the end of their pre-season – that Saturday, they were playing a friendly at Frickley, a Conference team. I was told to take my boots, although I wasn't certain to play. We went down in a minibus to Frickley, a big mining town in Yorkshire, and I found myself playing because we only had 11 men. We drew 2-2 and I'd made both of our goals.

"After the game, Billy wanted to know all about my history and where I'd come from. He said, 'Our first game of the season is next Saturday and you're in the team'. He was true to his word and I was paid £3. As the season progressed, I clicked into gear. Tow Law was basically a one-street town, but I was happy.

"Billy was my first real coach – someone prepared to work on my game. Before that, it had been basically: 'Get the ball and do what you want'. He put us into a system – a 4-3-3, which no one really played at that time. We went on a run and I was scoring goals."

As Waddle's reputation began to spread, scouts flocked over to Tow Law. "Sunderland offered me a trial – I had to use my holidays to have time off work," he recalls. "That was my summer holidays gone and the manager, Ken Knighton, told me I wouldn't be taken on because they couldn't see much difference between me and the youngsters they already had coming through the ranks.

"Frank Clark was his assistant then, and he's always admitted, 'Wow, didn't we get it wrong?!' Other teams were interested, such as Carlisle. They all wanted me to go over for a trial, but I couldn't – I had no holidays left to take. They had to either sign me or leave me where I was."

Barnsley, like many others, did the latter.

"I met Allan Clarke at Scotch Corner," says Waddle of a Tykes tussle. "He was Barnsley manager and I'd been recommended by one of his scouts, who'd told Allan to just sign me, but he wanted to see me play himself. The scout had informed Allan that if they signed me and I turned out to be crap, Allan could sack him. Allan insisted on seeing me, so that one passed by. Newcastle had been watching me, but again I had to tell them I didn't have time to miss work for a trial.

"Tow Law played Stalybridge Celtic in the FA Trophy and drew 2-2. After the game, Billy handed me a contract. My wages went from £3 to £5, and I was guaranteed the cash even if I didn't play because I was under contract. I remember asking our captain, Ray Ellison, 'Should I sign for £5?' He insisted, 'Yes, do it'. Years later, he told me that he was on £7 and didn't want anyone else at the club earning as much as him!"

Above Sausage seasoner to St James' Park star **Right** The Toon win promotion back to the top flight in 1983-84

"YOU'RE BOBBY, I'M BRYAN"

Newcastle finally gave Waddle his chance, but only after letting him run down his deal at Tow Law. "Newcastle paid Tow Law £500," he continues. "If I played 20 league games they'd hand over another £500, so I actually cost £1,000. People ask whether I'd have preferred to come through a proper football



"I WORKED ALONGSIDE NEWCASTLE SEASON TICKET HOLDERS, SEEING WHAT IT MEANT – SOMETIMES IT GOES OVER PLAYERS' HEADS"

apprenticeship, but the way I did it, I was so much more grounded. I'd worked with lads who had Newcastle season tickets. They'd arrive on a Monday morning moaning about how rubbish Newcastle had been, so I'd seen first hand what it meant to them. Sometimes that goes over players' heads.

"Going to Newcastle was frightening at the start, because I'd seen some of those players on television. Bill McGarry signed me – within a fortnight he'd got the sack and Arthur Cox came in, so it was a fresh start for everyone, not just me. Arthur was the hardest manager I ever had in my career. He was military style – no matter what I did, it was never enough. He would have us back on Friday afternoons doing weights, when I was playing on the Saturday. He was like a sergeant major trying to bulk me up.

"He loved to rule by fear – if I scored twice, I should have had a hat-trick. He was on my case for two years. He changed the club and made it more professional. Our centre-half Jeff Clarke had been around a bit, and said that Arthur was tough but the best. He also told me that there was no way Arthur would pick on me if he didn't rate me."

In 1982, second-tier Newcastle landed the signing of two-time Ballon d'Or winner Kevin Keegan, then 31. "We were over in Portugal for a pre-season tour," reminisces Waddle. "One of the lads rang home to be told that there were stories that Newcastle had signed Keegan. At the dinner table, a player asked if it was true – we were a very average side, so hardly anyone believed we'd be able to lure someone like Kevin.

"When we returned home, we discovered it was true. Overnight the club was soaring to another level, but when Kevin arrived the bulk of the team s**t themselves. The crowds rocketed from 22,000 or 23,000 to 34,000 or 35,000 sell-outs. Every ground was sold out. We all froze for a while."

At one stage, Waddle worried that Keegan might be having second thoughts about the Magpies move. "In his first season there he got frustrated," says the former winger. "He'd been used to playing with top Hamburg and England stars. All of a sudden, he was mixing it with local lads just trying to make their way in the game. As a team, we started to grow when Terry McDermott and Peter Beardsley came in. It evolved into a proper Newcastle side that the supporters wanted to watch. In the second year, we were used to Kev and the confidence coursed through us.

"We felt part of an exciting adventure, even though I was dropped a few games into the season. Arthur told me that to be part of the journey, I had to be more consistent – that I had the ability, but where we were going, I had to step up again. We managed to win promotion, then Kevin retired and Arthur left. The club did the dirty on Arthur. He'd initially asked for four years on his contract, with the proviso he'd be given another four years if we secured promotion. They reneged on that – Arthur was a man of principle, so he quit.

"In came Jack Charlton as gaffer. I liked Jack as a person, but I was never a fan of his football. It was myself and Beardsley up top, the ball would be launched over us, and he'd just tell us to get on the ball and run with it. I went into his office one day and said that rather than lumping the ball over us to run on to, it could be played into our feet. I tried to persuade him to change and must have sat in his office for half an hour, going through everything. He listened, but then simply said, 'No, out!' He wasn't for changing.

"He was like Bobby Robson in not knowing any of our names, too. For years, Bobby called Mark Hateley 'Tony', after his dad. He'd even call Bryan Robson 'Bobby' – Bryan had to keep reminding him, 'You're Bobby, I'm Bryan'.

"Jack would come into the changing room the day before a game, after having his usual cigarette outside, and go through the starting line-up. 'Right, tomorrow we're up against Ipswich – in goal...', then he'd glance around everyone, fix his eyes on Kevin Carr and say, 'the goalkeeper'. He didn't know his name. He'd go through the XI and instead of names, he'd point at 'the big lad' or 'the little lad'. You sat there in total astonishment – this was his pre-match team talk. ▸



"When we went to Ipswich, he had a piece of paper with all of the opposition names on it with notes, written by his assistant, Maurice Setters. He started off: 'Paul Cooper, great at saving penalties, so today, lads, don't get any penalties'. He went through the entire team like that. It was incredible."

BIG JACK, BIG TEMPER

In a First Division fixture in September 1984, Waddle scored a first-half hat-trick on QPR's artificial pitch. When the match finished 5-5, Charlton flew into a rage.

"We were 4-0 up at half-time," remembers Waddle. "We went into the dressing room on a high, only for Jack to mutter, 'I don't like it'. We were all looking at each other.

"He said, 'There's one word that comes to mind, which can happen – complacency'. He told us to go out and pretend it was really 2-1, so there was an advantage to hang on to. He said that 4-0 was dangerous.

"In no time, it went to 4-2 and then 4-3. We could see Jack hammering the dugout – he was wrecking anything he could get hold of. We made it 5-3, but QPR came back for 5-5 – the dugout had now been smashed to pieces and Jack had gone down the tunnel.

"We went over to our supporters at the end, then the kit man was standing in the tunnel, advising us to steer well clear of Jack for a bit longer in the hope he'd calm down. We went and clapped the fans again but eventually we had to face him. The rest of the lads told me to lead the way because I'd scored a hat-trick and surely he wouldn't have a go at me.

"I opened the door and suddenly this hand came out. Jack had been waiting, hidden just behind the door. He went, 'Not you, sit down'. He was obviously looking for someone, ready to throttle him. This carried on. He told every player to sit down, and goalkeeper Kevin Carr was the last to trudge in – Jack's hand came out and within seconds it was around Kevin's throat. He pushed him up against a wall and it was clear that he was going to strike him with his other hand, so we all quickly pounced on Jack to stop him.

"He was desperate to hit Kevin, yelling that he'd let five goals in, although none had been his fault. Finally it settled down. Then he went through the whole team, telling them what they should have done. He's coming round to me but I'm thinking, 'He can't have a go, I've scored a hat-trick'. I was wrong. He glared at me and said, 'And you, how many did you score today?' 'Three,' I replied. 'Well it should have been four!'"

Come the campaign's end, Waddle was off to Tottenham. "For a long time I was dubbed 'Judas' for supposedly turning my back on the club," says Waddle. "The truth was that Jack pissed me about for 12 months. I had a new contract lined up and was prepared to sign it. Then it was pulled away, and three weeks later it was back on. This carried on for ages. Jack had told the chairman, Stan Seymour Jr, that he'd be in charge of sorting out a deal for me to stay at Newcastle. It went on and on and I became sick of people coming up to me, asking why I hadn't signed.



Above "If Jack asks, the bottles are our two new centre-backs..."

"It got to February or March 1985, with just a few months remaining on my current deal, and I was fed up. By then I was determined to leave, no matter what Newcastle offered me. I was playing for England and knew Jack was paying me less than our centre-forward George Reilly. At the last minute, Stan pulled me in when he realised too late about what had been happening, and started throwing ridiculous figures at me. I'd have been one of the highest paid players in English football if I'd stayed at St James' Park.

"The transfer fee of £590,000 was settled at a tribunal, after I'd decided to join Spurs. Jack went mad, thinking Newcastle should have received a lot more. I'd been asked for my views and said that whatever Newcastle pocketed, I hoped they'd compensate Tow Law after only giving them £1,000. Jack had steam coming out of his ears."

Spurs was a step up and, in his first White Hart Lane season, Waddle struggled.

"Some players go to a new club and hit the ground running – I admire that, but it didn't happen for me," he says. "At the end of the season, I was questioning whether I should stay at Tottenham or head back north. I had a talk with the manager, Peter Shreeves, and also Glenn Hoddle. Peter was great – he told me he'd been delighted with what I'd done. I assured him there was more to my game than I'd shown – he asked me to give it until Christmas and assess everything then. Glenn also helped me enormously."

In April 1987, the two team-mates would even duet on a record together after nailing a karaoke tune at a sponsors' evening, then being approached about releasing a track. *Diamond Lights* – "not a bad song," according to spoilsport Radio 1 DJ Steve Wright, "not a good song either" – climbed as high as 12th in the charts. The duo even performed it live on *Top of the Pops*.

A follow-up single called *It's Goodbye* only reached 92 – Waddle later unleashed another ditty at Marseille, duetting with Basile Boli on electro-pop romp *We've Got A Feeling*.



Waddle and Hoddle spent two seasons at Spurs, before the latter joined Monaco. "That Tottenham team should have won trophies – we missed out, but we played entertaining football," says Waddle. "When I was working in the sausage seasoning factory, I used to watch *Match of the Day* in awe at players like Glenn. He had so much skill – Tottenham gave him a free role, which Terry Venables passed to me when he took over as Spurs manager in November 1987.

"Terry was great for me because, for once, I wasn't being bullied as a player. You could have conversations and throw things at him, and he'd try them out in training. You were urged to try things, and he gave you licence to play. Coming from Barcelona, that taught him to trust players with ability."

"LOTHAR WHO?"

Soon, Venables was also snapping up Paul Gascoigne, Waddle's fellow Geordie, thanks to the winger's persuasive powers. "I went up to the North East one weekend," he reflects now. "Terry had given me an additional day off and said that if I saw my pal up there, to have a word about him potentially coming to Tottenham, because everyone knew he was leaving Newcastle.

"I got in touch with Gazza and arranged to meet in a pub at midday on the Sunday. He strolled in with his entourage, all his mates. I asked him who he was going to sign for and he replied, 'Manchester United'. I said, 'Why don't you come to Spurs?' I told him he could get lost in London and no one would find out half the stuff he'd do. If he moved to United, he'd have Alex Ferguson on his case all of the time, along with some senior players. I said Terry Venables was really knowledgeable and would look after him.

"He said, no, he was still off to Manchester United. I said, 'Fair enough' and wished him the best of luck. I left the pub, then he came out with his friends shouting, 'Waddler, see you at White Hart Lane on Monday!' I thought he was joking around, but when I returned to London on the Tuesday, I was told Gazza had been at the club the previous day and signed a contract.

"Terry knew Gazza would get up to certain things, and sometimes was waiting by the phone to be informed of another escapade. He'd pull him in and talk to him, instead of having a real go. Gazza respected Terry and didn't want to let him down – Terry was an excellent fit for him.

"Gazza just went out and played. He didn't know any opposition players. At the 1990 World Cup, he didn't know any other player in that tournament, even including someone like Lothar Matthaus. He might have known Diego Maradona, but that was about it. For all he cared, he could have been facing Joe Bloggs from the Dog and Duck. In his mind, he was better than anyone."

That included on the tennis court, on the eve of the biggest game of his career.

"The night before the World Cup semi-final against West Germany, it was boiling hot and ▸

"TERRY VENABLES WAS GREAT BECAUSE YOU COULD THROW THINGS AT HIM AND HE'D TRY THEM – HE TRUSTED PLAYERS WITH ABILITY"



Below Waddle scored 42 goals for Tottenham and loved living in north London



Bobby Robson went for a wander around the hotel grounds to clear his head," recounts Waddle. "From a distance, he could see that a tennis match was going on. He got closer and closer and could see a guy with no socks on, a pair of trainers, a pair of shorts turned up at the waist and no top on. It's still about 70 degrees. He shouted, 'Gazza, is that you?'

"Paul turned around, sweat pouring off him, with one of England's biggest ever matches the following day. Gazza just said that he was enjoying a game of tennis. Bobby reminded him of the important fixture against West Germany and asked him who was he playing against. Gazza said it was a hotel waiter, and pleaded to end the match. 'What's the score?' asked Bobby. Gazza said it was 5-5. 'Alright, finish the match,' said Bobby. 'What set is it?' Gazza said, 'The fifth!'

"I roomed with him at that World Cup for seven weeks and must have had three hours' sleep! I love him to bits – a great footballer and great lad. He never had any direction and the boredom factor for him was unbelievable. But he was a one-off."

Waddle had hoped the Italia 90 semi-final against West Germany would prove to be the best night of his career. It turned out to be the worst, as his skied spot-kick confirmed England's elimination in the shootout.

It did the mulleted maverick no harm that he'd moved to Marseille a year earlier. In the months after the semi, he returned to France and cracked on with club football away from the English spotlight's oppressive gaze.

"I had two ways of handling the aftermath of the West Germany loss – either feel sorry for myself or show people it hadn't affected my game," he explains now. "I went back to Marseille, where I'd played well the season before and helped them to clinch the league. Later of course, I also did the pizza advert with Gareth Southgate."

That Pizza Hut commercial was six years later, after Southgate had endured his own penalty nightmare against Germany at Euro 96. The pair teamed up with Stuart Pearce, who'd also seen his spot-kick saved in 1990.







"Someone rang and asked whether we'd do it," remembers Waddle. "It was a bit of fun. We did it in a day and couldn't see anyone having a problem over it. Better players than me have missed penalties. It was a case of sticking my chest out and declaring it hadn't affected me at all."

Waddle had followed Hoddle to Ligue 1, but admits he'd been in no rush to leave White Hart Lane. "I was happy at Tottenham, but they've always been a selling club," he says. "When Marseille offered £2 million for me, Spurs said I wasn't for sale. Once they'd got up to £4.5m, I was told in a phone call that I'd been sold.

"I was straight on a plane. I signed on the Monday and my first game was on the Friday night at Lyon. I came on at half-time and we won comfortably. The next week, I started. It was tough at first, and again like the early days at Tottenham, I had some doubts. We had a one-year-old daughter back then and were living in a hotel.

"I knew I had to do well because Marseille were a club who'd soon get rid of you if you weren't performing. Thankfully, it all took off when I scored against Paris Saint-Germain. They were Marseille's big rivals – after that, everything clicked. Jean-Pierre Papin helped me tremendously. He spoke brilliant English and allowed us to cut short the hotel stay by moving into his house."

"I OWE YOU 30p"

Waddle's strike against PSG wasn't just any old goal. Flicking the ball past goalkeeper Joel Bats, he was presented with an empty net, so opted for the ultimate showboat – an audacious backheel despite the 0-0 scoreline. He'd make the shortlist for the Ballon d'Or in 1990, then finished 10th in the vote in 1991 after steering the club to the European Cup final, even if they lost on penalties to Red Star Belgrade. This time, understandably, he wasn't one of the takers.

"It turned out to be a great move for me," he says of his time at Marseille. "I played in the European Cup for three years, which was never going to happen at Spurs, and played in a final. I learned a different style of football and a different culture."

Waddle felt more able to express himself than with the national team, for whom he scored six goals in 62 appearances. "Playing for England frustrated me," he reveals. "They played 4-4-2, which didn't get the best out of myself and John Barnes. People would claim I didn't play for England like I had with Spurs and Marseille. It was the same for John, but 4-4-2 is all about leg work – you don't need wingers, it's about midfielders playing wide.

"If we'd played 4-3-3 instead, with Barnes and myself supporting Gary Lineker further up the field, you would have seen a different England. We both felt we played too deep – it was like playing at wing-back.

"Over the years, England have not played to the strengths of their flair players. There was Glenn Hoddle, and you can even go back to Stan Bowles, Tony Currie, Alan Hudson and Rodney Marsh. It's a lengthy list and it's still

"MARSEILLE WAS GREAT – I PLAYED IN THE EUROPEAN CUP FINAL. IT WOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED AT SPURS"

happening. Other countries would love those players. I recall Michel Platini saying that if Glenn and I had been French, we'd have both picked up 100 caps."

Waddle would win the league in each of his three seasons in France, before returning to England with Sheffield Wednesday in 1992, winning the Football Writers' Association's Player of the Year gong in his maiden Premier League campaign at Hillsborough.

"Marseille were going bust and needed the money," says Waddle. "Monaco were keen on signing me – [Marseille owner] Bernard Tapie said that if I stayed in France or went to Italy or Spain, he'd want £4m or £5m for me, but England would be £1m. They showed loads of Italian and Spanish football on TV in France, but hardly any English matches. He thought out of sight, out of mind – the Marseille fans wouldn't see me and wouldn't get too upset about him selling me.

"I spoke to Sheffield Wednesday and Leeds. I wasn't a big fan of how Leeds played, but I knew Wednesday boss Trevor Francis would give me the licence to play. We enjoyed some great cup runs and deserved to win a trophy. We should have beaten Arsenal in the 1993 FA Cup Final replay – I equalised but we lost 2-1 after extra time. The only consolation was beating Sheffield United in the semi-final. To most fans, that was the real final. We also lost to Arsenal in the League Cup final. That team warranted silverware, and the fans are incredible. Even in League One, the support was phenomenal. They should be a Premier League club again."

After brief spells at Falkirk, Bradford and Sunderland, Waddle became Burnley player-manager in 1997. He stayed for one season, narrowly avoiding relegation to the fourth tier. "Moving into management with Burnley was very difficult," he concedes. "I thought the level of the players would have been a lot better, even though they were in the third tier. Training was good and they bought into what I was trying to do, but crossing the white line on a matchday was different.

Clockwise from above Chris was classy at l'OM; Gazza and the Waddler roomed together; "I can see your house from here, JPP"; a diamond duo; "Ask Gascoigne if he's heard of me now, yeah?"

"I had loads of problems with the board. As a manager, you just want to get the team right to win football matches, whereas all the board looks at is finance and suddenly you're arguing about hotel bills. At Burnley, for away games, you weren't allowed both breakfast and a pre-match meal – it had to be one or the other. You had to compile a list of players and what they'd chosen.

"We played at Northampton and won 1-0. There was a board meeting every Monday, with sandwiches and bottles of wine. It came up that they'd noticed somebody had both a breakfast and a pre-game meal prior to the Northampton match. They asked me who it was, and I said I didn't know. I'd had enough. We were battling to get out of the relegation zone, playing well and I got that. I asked how much the offending brekkie had cost – it was £10.30, so I went on about the red wine and a la carte menu they enjoyed the night before the game, on a Burnley credit card.

"I told them I'd never attend one of those meetings again. I handed over £10, saying I owed 30p and I'd bring it in the next day. We got on with the rest of the season. I had a good set of players, and we beat Plymouth on the last day to stay up.

"Everyone was on a high. With a couple of new players, we could make the play-offs the following season. I went into the boardroom after that win and it was flat – they obviously didn't want me there, and all I received was a half-hearted 'well done' from a few of them.

"I met the chairman on the Monday. I told him we needed two players, but the response was that we had to sell players instead. I said the best thing was for me to leave. I thanked them for the opportunity, and that was that. I did the best I could, but I couldn't see any future with them wanting to sell my best four players. I loved the football side, but the rest was a pain in the backside."

For numerous years now, Waddle has been a co-commentator for BBC Radio 5 Live. "I've always studied the game and I enjoy it," he says. "What I see is what I say – I won't beat about the bush."

His love for football has never diminished. Even after his experience at Burnley, Waddle played in non-league for Worksop until the age of 41, before brief spells at Glapwell and Stocksbridge Park Steels, then an appearance for Hallam in 2013, at 52. A decade on, he still has a run-out when he can, and was poised to feature for Hallam again last month due to an injury crisis. "I play a bit of five-a-side on Tuesdays," he grins. "I get the odd niggle, but if I can get the boots on, I'll be there."

Perhaps that enthusiasm explains why he played for £3 a week at the start of his career. Some may have lost heart, but he persevered until the world woke up to the talent that was always there. On the biggest stages of all, too.

TWO SEASONS 193 GOALS 194 POINTS

Twenty-two years after their last top-flight game, Ipswich Town are back after consecutive promotions under next-big-thing coach Kieran McKenna. Next stop: Premier League survival?

Words Chris Evans


IPSWICH
TOWN

There weren't many times in Alun Armstrong's career when he upstaged Adriano. Yet as the Ipswich forward left the Portman Road pitch to the home supporters' adoration, he'd eclipsed not just the Brazilian, but an entire team of superstars. On that November night in 2001, Armstrong was the hero.

The Tractor Boys substitute had headed the winning goal in a 1-0 win over Inter, writing his name into Ipswich Town folklore, and giving George Burley's men a first-leg lead in the UEFA Cup third-round against the Nerazzurri. Sure, Inter would go on to win the second leg 4-1 at San Siro, thanks to Christian Vieri's hat-trick, but that tie marked the peak of a remarkable two years in East Anglia.

"It was surreal," admits Ipswich fan Craig Finbow, from the Blue Monday podcast. "We'd been knocking on the door of the Premier League for several years before promotion in 2000. Then we were in Europe, beating Inter. On one hand, you were thinking, 'Is this right?'. On the other, you were thinking, 'Is this now the norm?'"

After beating Barnsley in the play-off final, Ipswich had remarkably bagged fifth place in their first season back in the top flight – no other newly promoted side has finished as high since Nottingham Forest in 1995.

"It was pretty much the same squad, with maybe a couple of additions," defender Jamie Clapham tells *FFT*. "But we had a style, a freshness, an energy – young talent and hungry players who hadn't quite made it elsewhere. We were playing good football and were still in the mix for the Champions League towards the end of the season, which was ridiculous.

"Liverpool came to Portman Road and played 4-5-1 – it showed how much respect we'd got from opposition managers. People were becoming fearful of playing Ipswich."

Those highs didn't last. Six months after beating Inter, Town went down. It's hard to judge whether it says more about the size of that achievement or how devoid of success much of the interceding 22 years were that the back-to-back promotions under Kieran McKenna that returned Ipswich to the Premier League resonate so much in Suffolk. The most important thing is they're back.

"ANYONE GOT A SPARE £250?"

Back in 2001, European qualification had looked like the springboard for the 1981 UEFA Cup winners to re-establish themselves at English football's top table, but poor recruitment and loss of the values that had served them so well stung hard. The poster boys of their demise were goalkeeper Matteo Sereni, a £4.5m record signing to replace Arsenal-bound Richard Wright, Ajax's former Champions League-winning winger Finidi George and a flurry of other continental stars who were expected to take Ipswich to the next level. The opposite happened.

"We didn't think we'd be pushing for Europe again, but we thought we could be top half," says Clapham. "With four or five new players coming into the team, though, the dynamic and how we played changed. We'd gone away from what we'd built. All of a sudden there were marquee signings – big names, but unproven in English football."

Relegation on the final day of the season after a 5-0 loss at Liverpool was exacerbated by the collapse of ITV Digital in March 2002. Hamstrung by that devastating impact on finances and shackled by big wages from their ill-fated recruitment drive, Ipswich were soon sourcing money from anywhere they could, just to keep the wolf from the door.











"McKENNA'S OUR TRUMP CARD. HE'S THE REASON WE'RE HERE AND WE NEED HIM TO SURVIVE"

"We almost went to the wall," says Finbow. "We were selling off players on the cheap – Matt Holland went to Charlton for a knockdown price. There were requests put out to supporters to help through share issues, to stretch to £250 to help keep the lights on. It went downhill pretty quickly."

Joe Royle replaced George Burley after a poor start following relegation and kept the club in the promotion hunt, despite the club entering administration in February 2003 – an era pre-points deductions. Ipswich then made the play-offs in successive seasons – losing the semi-final to West Ham on both occasions, the second having missed automatic promotion by two points.

As chairman David Sheepshanks struggled to balance the books, the club slid into mid-table purgatory they wouldn't escape for the best part of a decade under Jim Magilton, Roy Keane and Paul Jewell. Businessman Marcus Evans bought out Sheepshanks in 2007, cleared the debt and promised investment and hopes were initially high.

"At one of the first home games after Evans took over, fans were waving £20 notes around to say, 'We're in the money now,'" remembers *East Anglian Daily Times* chief football writer Stuart Watson. "He made the high-profile appointment of Roy Keane and it was meant to be Ipswich kicking on again."

Keane's 2009 arrival was a coup. In his only past season as a second-tier boss, the Irishman had led Sunderland from the foot of the table to the title, and got a healthy budget to do the same at Portman Road. In Keane's first summer he lavished north of £7m on Grant Leadbitter, Lee Martin, Carlos Edwards and Tamas Priskin, but the club finished 15th. Sat even lower midway through the next campaign, Keane was sacked.

A team dubbed 'Dad's Army' due to its dependence on old stagers such as Lee Bowyer and Jimmy Bullard continued to underwhelm before a run of one win in 12 to kick off 2012-13 saw Jewell get the boot, with Mick McCarthy brought in to drag the Tractor Boys out of the relegation zone. By then, the optimism of Evans's takeover had dissipated, as had any significant investment. "The feeling was we'd missed the boat with Keane – that was our chance," laments Finbow.

NUMBSKULLS AND DEMOLITION MEN

McCarthy did well with limited resources, securing three consecutive top 10 finishes – including a 2015 play-off semi-final defeat to rivals Norwich. Tolerated when things were going well, the manager's pragmatic approach soon came under fire as mid-table misery took hold and fans yearned for more.

Much-changed sides struggling to dispatch lower-league opposition curtailed cup runs before they started – when Ipswich did draw a plum League Cup tie, facing Manchester United at Old Trafford in 2015, McCarthy named a shadow side. McCarthy became the fall guy for the club's stagnation. His no-frills, results-at-all-costs approach outperformed their budget, but a sense of apathy grew. Attendances slipped lower and lower, as fans looked elsewhere for entertainment.

"There's only a certain number of years you can 'win ugly'," says Finbow. "Once you start losing, it's just 'ugly'. The football in his last year was a tough watch, the atmosphere at the ground wasn't great at away games was even worse. It was a chore – you were doing it out of loyalty, rather than looking forward to it. No star players, no sparking football, it was 0-0 and we'd go games without having a shot on target.

"The relationship between McCarthy and the fans got worse – lots of booing from the stands. Mick being Mick, he wasn't going to take that lying down and started to give it back in press conferences or by showing his displeasure with the fans at games."

McCarthy had also inherited Ipswich's wretched record against Norwich, who they hadn't beaten in the Old Farm since 2009, a run that still continues today. Frustration boiled over at Carrow Road in February 2018.

"Ipswich took the lead very late on, and it looked like they were finally going to end the hoodoo," explains Watson. "Mick had got a bit of stick from his own fans, so when Ipswich scored, he gave a little 'up yours' gesture towards the away end, which was caught by the Sky cameras. Norwich went up the other end and equalised, then Mick had to apologise. It was a broken relationship."

A month later, after McCarthy branded his critics "numbskulls", the club said his soon- ▸

Above Ipswich's 22 years of hurt are finally over **Clockwise from far left** "Are you Adriano in disguise?"; Keane struggled in Suffolk; Mick didn't connect with the fans





to-expire contract wouldn't be renewed. It didn't even get that far – the Yorkshireman announced, "I won't have to listen to that again, I'm out of here", after locals booed his decision to substitute debutant Barry Cotter in a mid-April home defeat of Barnsley.

Amid a huge player overhaul, Paul Hurst lasted only until October after winning one of his first 14 league games, leaving the club adrift at the bottom of the table. Ex-Norwich boss Paul Lambert – the first manager to cross the East Anglia divide – came with controversy and couldn't stop relegation to the third tier. Yet the mood had become so blasé that demotion produced no outpouring of anger, just grim acceptance and perverse optimism that it was for the greater good.

"Relegation came in a home game against Birmingham, and the whole crowd started singing, 'Every little thing is gonna be alright,' from Bob Marley and the Wailers' *Three Little Birds*," recalls Watson. "There was a naivety they'd see some different stadiums, have a League One tour, win some games and a rebirth – going backwards to go forwards."

That renaissance would take four years. Back-to-back 2-0 defeats to Accrington and Rotherham in October began a run of just two wins in 12 league matches. Sore heads on New Year's Day 2020 only got worse. "We were struggling and they handed Lambert a new five-year contract," says Finbow. "It came out of the blue. Everyone was just wondering what was going on."

Ipswich were 11th, after another dismal run of seven defeats in nine matches, when the season was suspended in March because of COVID. Helped by games played behind closed doors without irate fans, Lambert battled on for another 11 months. Paul Cook was the next cab off the rank, promising to be 'Demolition Man' to overhaul the squad, having achieved promotion at his three previous clubs, Chesterfield, Portsmouth and Wigan. Future successes Conor Chaplin, Wes Burns, Sam Morsy and Vaclav Hladky were among the 19 summer 2021 signings but by December, Cook's squad were still struggling to gel and Ipswich sat 11th, having flirted with the League One relegation zone after a six-match winless start to the season.

"THERE WAS A NAIVETY THAT FANS WOULD HAVE A LEAGUE ONE TOUR, SOME WINS AND REBIRTH"

Above Cook made too many changes too quickly
Top Lambert, the former Norwich gaffer, was always a stretch at Ipswich

McKENNA THE HYPNOTIST

Months after becoming the club's new chief executive, arriving from Bristol City, Mark Ashton's first managerial appointment proved the turning point, even if most Town fans had to Google the chosen one.

Kieran McKenna's coaching career began while studying at Loughborough University, then worked his way up the youth ranks at Tottenham and Manchester United, before joining Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's first-team set-up in 2018. What the 35-year-old lacked in his predecessors' senior experience, he made up for in clarity of vision.

He immediately made them harder to beat, losing only four more league games after taking over in December 2021 – albeit with a few too many draws – and developing a style that would carry through to his first full season in charge. Time on the training pitch was the fulcrum of McKenna's work and though he did make additions – most notably left-back Leif Davis from Leeds for a seven-figure fee – he set to work with many of those players Cook had signed.

"For the first period under McKenna, he was learning lessons about League One – the opponents he was up against, lesser pitches than he was used to," adds Watson. "He worked with the players he inherited – that spoke volumes about his coaching and man management. People talk about how good a coach he is, how he develops people, how he's ultra calm, very logical, very methodical. A football obsessive."

Ipswich were a team transformed. In the promotion hunt by the turn of the year, they kicked on again in the second half of 2022-23, helped by January recruits Nathan Broadhead and Massimo Luongo. McKenna's side won 41 of the last 45 points by an aggregate 45-4 scoreline. The Tractor Boys beat Forest Green, Burton and Wycombe 4-0, and thrashed Charlton and Exeter 6-0.

In an incredibly fierce race for promotion, that run was essential – Ipswich finished

RAPID RISES

Ipswich have gone from the third tier to the Premier League in successive seasons – these were the four most recent teams to do the same



WATFORD
Graham Taylor and Elton John had led the Hornets from the lower leagues to the top flight before – reuniting in 1997 as manager and chairman respectively, they did it again. Third-tier champions in 1998, they won the Division One play-off final a year later (above) – but then finished bottom of Premier League.



MANCHESTER CITY
After their mad comeback win over Gillingham in the 1999 Division Two play-off final (above), Joe Royle's City beat Ipswich to automatic promotion to the Premier League, then signed ex-Ballon d'Or George Weah. Weah left in October after Royle often benched him, and City went down again. Ah.



NORWICH
When the Canaries lost 7-1 at home to Colchester on 2009-10 League One's opening day, it was hard to imagine they'd be in the Premier League in two years. They swiftly nicked U's boss Paul Lambert, won the league (above), finished second the Championship, then 12th in the top flight, too.



SOUTHAMPTON
A 10-point deduction prevented Saints exiting League One at the first attempt but were 2010-11 runners-up under Nigel Adkins, then took second again in the Championship, with Rickie Lambert (above) on fire. Mauricio Pochettino ousted Adkins midway through their top-flight return, finishing 14th.

with 98 points, 101 goals scored and just 35 conceded, but still only edged out third-placed Sheffield Wednesday by two points as Plymouth were champions with 101. All achieved with a swagger that hadn't been witnessed at Portman Road for 20 years, or perhaps even as far back as the UEFA Cup-winning days of Arnold Muhren, John Wark, Frans Thijssen and Russell Osman in 1981.

"It would have been easy to get to the Championship and come away from playing fluid, flexible, entertaining, attack-minded, brave, bold football," says Watson. "But they stuck at it. There was this outpouring of emotion when they got back there – they rode the wave of momentum."

The first match back was in front of the Sky cameras at Sunderland, who'd reached the play-offs the previous season – Ipswich won 2-1. It was a statement of intent as Town triumphed in 12 of their first 14 league games to extend their record from mid-February to the end of October 2023 to a ridiculous 25 wins in 29. Improbably, Ipswich were second in the Championship, nine points clear of third-placed Leeds – and with a game in hand, too.

"Fans from Leicester, Southampton and Leeds would say, 'Fair play to Ipswich, but there's no way in the world they'll keep this up'," says Finbow now, with understandable smugness. "They thought we couldn't keep the pace with their big-spending clubs with parachute payments, and the bulk of a Premier League squad intact."

MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE

For a brief period, it looked like they might be right. A sticky patch from December to February halted Ipswich's progress in the depths of winter, as the Tractor Boys won just one of nine, including a chastening 4-0 reverse at Elland Road. Suddenly, they'd slipped below the three relegated Premier League clubs, and sat fourth.

A 4-0 triumph at Millwall on Valentine's Day breathed new life into a listing season, sparking a run of nine wins in 10 games to go top in March. Embodying the club's new-found fearless spirit, last-gasp goals became commonplace. A 97th-minute winner against Southampton followed a come-from-behind late show against Bristol City, while Chelsea loanee Omari Hutchinson – now a permanent Tractor Boy – bagged a winner even after Rotherham had levelled four minutes into injury time of a 4-3 thriller.

"The amount of goals we scored late on in games was testament to the belief that if we kept going and trusted the Kieran McKenna process, eventually things would come good," adds Finbow. "Normally there'd be tutting and moaning, but we had the evidence that this team, system and tactics would give us a chance to score goals.

"We were getting to 65 minutes in games, taking off our front four and bringing on a fresh four to go again. There wasn't sitting back on leads either, it was 'OK, we're 1-0 up, let's get another'. That confidence went through the entire team like wildfire.





Above "How many Ipswich promotions in two years?" **Top** McKenna (centre) has fostered a fine team spirit

"The best example was the Southampton game. They'd taught us a lesson for 60 minutes and are a very well-drilled team, who looked like they were going to turn us over. We were 2-1 down at half-time, but the crowd and players weren't fazed. We got a goal back, then on 97 minutes, Jeremy Sarmiento poked it home to win it. We'd had 65 per cent possession, and we'd kept going. A lot of fans said that's the loudest they can remember Portman Road ever being – the release of ecstasy with that goal."

Promotion on the final day, via a 2-0 home win over relegated Huddersfield, yielded a spectacular outpouring of emotion. It was fitting Wes Burns – part of the League One cohort – got the opener against the Terriers, one of 92 Town goals scored in a magical second-placed season amassing 96 points.

If bridging the growing financial gulf between League One and the Championship, was an incredible feat, repeating it in the Premier League is another entirely. Many of McKenna's promotion team were signed in League One, with no top-flight experience to call upon. Further additions are essential.

The size of the task facing Ipswich would have been even greater, though, had summer interest shown in McKenna by Chelsea, Manchester United and Brighton led to the Ulsterman flying the nest. A new four-year deal proceeded a nervy fortnight for the fans.

"He's our trump card," says Finbow. "You could see it from his perspective if a big club comes calling, but he's come this far with us, so it'd be nice if he can see that out. He's the reason we are where we are – to give us any chance of survival, he needs to stay."

There's belief in Suffolk they could prove plenty wrong as relegation favourites.

"Straight after promotion, McKenna said it was a monumental step up to the Premier League but after last season, anything is possible," reasons Watson. "The last time Ipswich were here, they finished fifth and qualified for Europe – the landscape has changed significantly in two decades, but I'm quietly confident they can stay up."

Ipswich's first opponents? Liverpool. Just like their last Premier League game 22 years ago. Yeah, anything's possible, alright. Just ask Alun Armstrong.

“HOW DID I FEEL AFTER SCORING NINE GOALS IN FIVE GAMES AT EURO 84? TIRED!”

Forty years ago, Michel Platini’s Euros-record tally propelled France to glory on home soil... and he wasn’t even a forward. No player has ever had a finer European Championship – now, in his own words, he recalls it to *FFT*

Interview Florent Torchut



When the 1984 European Championship came around in France, my home country, I'd been playing in Italy with Juventus for two years. I was nearly 29 years old, I'd matured a lot, and I was captain of the French national team. With all of my experience, my mission was to protect the rest of the team and take them to the summit of European football.

I was convinced we had the qualities to prevail. I wasn't a maths teacher, slapping them on the wrist with a ruler, but I had to make them understand that they were good players and should believe in themselves. Alain Giresse, Patrick Battiston, Jean Tigana, Maxime Bossis – they were all great players, even if they'd shown their qualities only in French football until then.

That summer, I was determined to take our band of friends to the top.

Growing up, I'd admired the wonderful Brazil team of 1970. Rivelino, Tostao – and Pele, of course. As a teenager, I liked to sign my name 'Pele-atini'. I idolised Johan Cruyff, though I couldn't copy him. I didn't have the speed Cruyff had; I was more of a midfielder and an organiser.

I met him in an exhibition match at the Camp Nou in 1980. I was playing in midfield alongside him and Hansi Muller, with Giorgio Chinaglia up front, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge on the right and Oleh Blokhin on the left. I had to step back a bit from where I usually played, because someone had to defend!

I was still playing for Saint-Etienne at that point. When I arrived in the dressing room, I saw my hero and said, "Johan, I'm glad to meet you." He didn't pay much attention to me! We met each other many times after that, playing in golf tournaments together and getting along well.

In 1976, when Michel Hidalgo took over as coach of our national team, people in France thought football was just a thing the Dutch played. French football was in the doldrums. But Michel trusted players; we had people like Alain Giresse and myself, and we developed our own philosophy. I remember the former Milan and Roma coach, Nils Liedholm, once saying, "As long as we have the ball, the opposition don't." Michel said that, too, and he had players who could hold on to the ball.

At the 1982 World Cup, our 'Magic Square' was born. Actually, it was on the day I got injured by Antonin Panenka, who broke me in half during a game against Czechoslovakia! Jean Tigana replaced me against Austria and because he was so good, he never left the team again – when I came back for the game after that, we removed a striker and formed a four-man square in midfield.

With myself, Giresse and Bernard Genghini, we had three No.10s on the field. Today, sides would rather play with three No.6s than three No.10s, but I don't see why it can't be done. Barcelona did it really well with Xavi, Andres Iniesta and Lionel Messi – it's a question of footballing intelligence. Later, Luis Fernandez came into the team in place of Genghini and we were very well organised. Everyone knew what they had to do.



We reached the semi-finals of the World Cup and could have gone to the final, but lost to West Germany on penalties. Going into Euro 84, there was a positive atmosphere. For me, football has always been about 11 friends playing together with a ball, and the team had known each other for years – I'd even been in the army with Maxime Bossis, during my military service. We all got on well.

At that time, Bordeaux and Nantes were great teams in France. At Juventus, I'd been the top scorer in Serie A and had just won the Ballon d'Or. People started to say, "The French aren't that bad after all – they can win." At Juve, the Italians told me they were afraid of us; that they preferred to play West Germany, not us, in the final in 1982. We still had to gain confidence in ourselves, though.

Euro 84 was only the second time that France had ever taken part in the European Championship – the other was the very first edition in 1960, also staged in France. Only eight teams qualified in 1984: England and



"I DIDN'T NOTICE AT THE TIME IT WAS A PERFECT HAT-TRICK... SO I DID IT AGAIN THREE DAYS LATER"







Above left One of three Ballons d'Or on the trot Top to bottom Thrashing the Belgians; being a cheeky chappy in France's team photo; reaching new heights in the Euro 84 Final

Italy weren't there, but Germany and Spain were, plus Denmark, an emerging nation. Belgium, Yugoslavia and Portugal all had great players, too. [Romania were the other team to qualify.] There were no small teams. The level would be high from the start.

I was the last to join up with the squad, after playing in Juventus' victory in the European Cup Winners' Cup final against Porto in Basel. Our opening game was against Denmark at Parc des Princes. They had some very good players, such as Michael Laudrup, Preben Elkjaer and Klaus Berggreen, who shadowed me throughout the entire match. That was something players did a lot – it's difficult to have someone marking you individually like that, following you everywhere.

In the end, I managed to score with a shot that deflected off a defender's head as they were on the ground. I was lucky, but I'd got away from Berggreen and had to be in the right place to shoot. In competitions like that, the planets have to align if you want to go all the way. We couldn't afford to lose that first game. Winning 1-0 got us off to a good start.

Then we put in our best performance of the tournament, against Belgium in Nantes. It was in front of 50,000 spectators, for the inauguration of the Stade de la Beaujoire, and it was 40 degrees. It was the first time in my life that I'd won a match in Nantes, because I'd never won at their old stadium, the Stade Marcel-Saupin. With Tigana, Fernandez and Giresse, we had a team that played possession football – we knew we had to do that to succeed. We won 5-0 and it sent a message to the whole world.

I scored three goals in that match, and I didn't notice at the time that it was what people call a perfect hat-trick: left foot, right foot, header. So, against Yugoslavia three days later, I did it again! The game was in Saint-Etienne, where I'd played for three years; 40,000 people had come to watch the French team and see me again, so I didn't want to lose in front of my old fans. We were 1-0 down at half-time but came back to win 3-2. The hat-trick made me France's all-time top scorer, ahead of Just Fontaine.

We'd already qualified for the semi-finals before that game, but we had to win to top the group and play our semi in Marseille. We all wanted to play there – the fervour and footballing spirit in Marseille reminded us of Argentina, Spain or Italy.

That semi-final against Portugal was very strange, because honestly we should have won 2-0 or 3-0. We played one of our best games, and went 1-0 up after I was fouled and won a free-kick. Alain Giresse told me that our defender, Jean-Francois Domergue, could take the free-kick. I joked, "Who is that?!" But I was in pain after the foul, so Jean-Francois took the free-kick and scored.

For a long time after that goal, however, things didn't go our way. I knew that Portugal team quite well because of the Cup Winners' Cup final I'd played just a few weeks earlier against Porto, who formed the backbone of that national team. They equalised to take the match to extra-time, then scored again. We came very close to losing that semi-final. With six minutes left, we were still 2-1 down until Jean-Francois scored his second goal to make it 2-2.

Then Jean Tigana went on this crazy run. He was an athlete and could make runs like that, sprinting 60 metres after almost 120 minutes of football. He crossed the ball and as it came to me, I controlled it with my back to goal and turned. It's a moment that will stay with me forever: it felt like a week passed between my control and the shot. There were a lot of bodies in front of me on the goal-line, so I thought, 'I'm going to fire a cannon ball. No one is going to put their head in the way of this, otherwise they're off to the hospital – they're dead'. It went in and we were through to the final.

We faced Spain at Parc des Princes in the final. I've always had the greatest respect for Spain. The first foreign club that ever tried to sign me were Valencia, when I was still at Nancy in 1973. Alfredo Di Stefano was their manager and he came to watch me play; he wanted me and Nancy were willing to sell, but I had two years left on my contract and wished to see it through to the end. ▸

Later on, Barcelona tried to sign me every year, until the end of my playing career, but the best championship at that time was Italy's, in terms of both finances and results. Real Madrid tried to hire me as their coach, too, after Euro 92 – I'd managed the French national team when we beat Spain home and away in qualifying, so they offered me the job, but when I resigned as France boss, I decided I didn't want to coach any more.

Ahead of that Euro 84 Final, we'd watched Spain's win over West Germany in their last group match, when Antonio Maceda's late goal put them through and eliminated their opponents. They had a number of Real Madrid players who were used to big games, and in the semi-final they'd beaten Denmark, whom we had struggled against. We knew it wasn't going to be easy.

It was our fifth match in a fortnight, and we knew it was all going to come down to physicality. Fortunately, we had Bossis and Tigana to keep us going, because they were athletes. I knew that Jose Antonio Camacho was going to mark me throughout the game, so I had to try to escape him.

We had no doubts that we could make history that day. We knew that we needed to have the ball and play in the opposition half, because we didn't have players who could move at speed on the counter-attack. I scored goals in that tournament because we were playing well and dominating – to start 60 metres from goal and run that sort of distance with the ball was slightly more complicated for me!

Just before the hour mark, with the score still 0-0, Bernard Lacombe won a free-kick close to the box. It was well positioned for me, a little to the left. I knew it wasn't just anyone in goal: it was Luis Arconada, who had an immense career.

A free-kick was always a power struggle between me and the goalkeeper. There was the wall, the goalkeeper chose where he was going to position himself, and then a game of deception would begin. I could see that Arconada thought I was going to put it over the wall, so I hit it quite hard towards the other side of the goal, towards his left post. He went to his right, then moved back again, but the ball kept spinning, and with the spin it snuck under him.

I had enormous respect for Arconada, so I didn't celebrate. I didn't want to celebrate a goalkeeper's mistake. It wasn't the goal I'd like to have scored. Even though we were leading 1-0 in the European Championship final and it was a joy we'd never experienced before, I felt sorry for Arconada. Later, when I was the UEFA president, I invited him to the final of Euro 2008 in Vienna, which Spain won. Inside I was happy when I scored that goal, but I wasn't going to run around the pitch as if I'd scored the goal of my life.





Yvon Le Roux was sent off with five minutes to go and we found ourselves down to 10 men. But we weren't going to repeat Seville in 1982, when we'd led West Germany 3-1 in the World Cup semi-final and lost. Spain were not coming back.

This time, we had the experience. Jean Tigana still had gas in his tank, so he sent the ball to Bruno Bellone, who ran towards goal. I wasn't too far behind him. We were getting really close to the end of the match and I told myself that he needed to hit the ball hard, as far as possible into the stands, and that the fans needed to hold on to the ball to buy time. When I saw how he shot, trying to chip it over the goalkeeper, I thought, 'What an idiot'. But it ended up in the back of the net!

That was it. Game over. At that moment, I was the happiest man alive. I jumped on Bruno, found myself under him, then didn't move for 10 minutes! It was a goal for the ages. We were the first French team to win a title in a team sport.

How did I feel after scoring nine goals in five games? I was tired! But I didn't play football just to score goals; I played football to win games. Of course, if I could score to help the team win, then I would do it, but I wasn't obsessed by that. If I could pass the ball to a friend rather than score, it was the same thing. I was never into statistics. I'm still the second-highest scorer in the history of the European Championship, having played in only one tournament! Cristiano Ronaldo has the record, after playing in five. And you have to remember that I was a midfielder – I had to score from further away!



OUT ON HIS OWN

9	6	5	5
MICHEL PLATINI 1984	ANTOINE GRIEZMANN 2016	MARCO VAN BASTEN 1988	ALAN SHEARER 1996



"FRANCE SHOULD HAVE WON THE WORLD CUP IN 1986. BUT IN 1984, I WAS IN TOP SHAPE"

Unlike the 1982 World Cup, and the 1986 World Cup, too, I was in top shape at that Euros. I wasn't injured; as my team-mate, Jean-Marc Ferreri, used to say, I was flying, and I was in the prime of my life. If I'd played the 1982 World Cup semi-final like that, with the Italian philosophy and tactical approach that Giovanni Trapattoni later taught me at Juventus, we would never have lost to West Germany. Trapattoni paid attention to the smallest detail, whereas Michel Hidalgo was more of a romantic. He wanted to win, but he wanted to win by playing well.

At the 1986 World Cup, I think we were the best team in the world. With all due respect to Diego Maradona and the Argentinians, I think we were better than them. We should have won the World Cup that year, but again we lost to West Germany in the semi-finals. I scored but the linesman disallowed the goal for offside. Afterwards, every time I ran into Franz Beckenbauer, he'd say, "I don't know how we managed to beat you."

Clockwise from left "Just look at his face!"; the goal that made French history; "A free-kick was a power struggle between me and the goalkeeper"; Platini gets his hands, and lips, on the trophy

I don't know if there are any No.10s like me today. Andrea Pirlo was a sort of withdrawn No.10, organising the game at Juventus. But the game is different now. Football used to belong to the players – now it belongs to the coaches. The players play according to what the manager tells them. There are still good No.10s out there, but the coaches don't know how to play them any more.

Right now, I'm following Jude Bellingham – an attacking midfielder, a No.10, who scores a lot of goals and reminds me of Antoine Griezmann. At the beginning with Griezmann, we wondered if he was lucky to always be in the right place at the right time, or if it was because he knew where to place himself. After a while, we knew it wasn't luck. I like to watch those players who have a feel for the game; who adapt to the team.

If I happen to be in front of the television, I'll watch a few Euro 2024 matches and follow France's progress, of course. They can win. During my time as UEFA president, I was almost anaesthetised – I couldn't react to things I saw on the pitch. If I went to watch Real Madrid play Barcelona, I couldn't smile if Barça scored because then Real wouldn't be very happy. If Cristiano Ronaldo scored and I smiled, it was Barça who wouldn't be very happy. I had to be neutral.

I mainly watch the players, though – that's what interests me the most. The game is all about players. Back in 1984, Michel Hidalgo trusted us players and it ended up being the coronation of a great generation of French talent. Before that tournament, I was sure we had the quality to win it. And we did.

5	5	5	5	5
PATRICK KLUIVERT	SAVO MILOSEVIC	MILAN BAROS	CRISTIANO RONALDO	PATRIK SCHICK
2000	2000	2004	2020	2020

HARRY REDKNAPP'S GUIDE TO TRANSFERS

During his 34-year managerial career, the former Portsmouth and Spurs boss was known for his market nous. As the summer window nears its end, he shares his experience of deadline day incidents with *FFT*, including a call from George Weah

Did you call me a wheeler dealer?

WORK WITH PEOPLE YOU TRUST

Success comes when everyone at a club is on the same page – that goes for transfers, too. Many disputes between managers and chairmen have started over player recruitment – one wants to spend money to improve the team and the other is more cautious with the purse strings. Inevitably, there is potential for friction – even more so when the chairman offers his own opinion on which players to sign. Harry Redknapp found success when his relationship with the club hierarchy was strong – when they trusted him to make judgements on players, rather than contradicting him with their own personal views.

"At Tottenham, Daniel Levy never really interfered," Redknapp tells *FFT*, remembering a four-year spell at White Hart Lane when he guided the club from the relegation zone to the Champions League. "Although, like everybody, he might try harder to get a lad if he fancied them! He might say, 'Oh, we couldn't quite get the deal done, Harry...' But, in the main, he was as good as gold to deal with. If we could afford it, great. If we couldn't afford it and couldn't spend the money, that was how it was with Daniel."

At Bournemouth, Redknapp's first club as a boss, managing director Brian Tiler was the key man. "If you had a chief executive who had any idea about football, they'd help you. They know the problems," says the 77-year-old. "Back in my early days, I was lucky, I had Brian Tiler, who had been captain of Aston Villa. He knew the game, he was brilliant, he helped me and he backed me 100 per cent everywhere. If you've got someone like that, it's a big help."

The pair helped Bournemouth to gain promotion from the old Third Division, and remained very close until Tiler's tragic death in a minibus accident during the 1990

Words Chris Flanagan

World Cup – the duo had travelled from England to Italy together to watch several matches at the tournament.

At Portsmouth, Redknapp worked with people he respected, too – and not just those above him. Arriving aged 55, advice from his backroom staff was also crucial. "Young managers should take someone experienced with them – someone who's been there, done it and can help them," he says. "I even did that at Portsmouth, I took Jim Smith with me. Jim was older than me! He was brilliant, I could ask his opinion, then in the end, you go with what you feel."

CHOOSE PLAYERS CAREFULLY

Frequent phone calls from agents were a given for Redknapp. That could lead to opportunities, but also pitfalls – not every player offered was suited to his team.

"Agents would always be ringing you, but you had to have your own knowledge of players," stresses Redknapp. "If they rang up, often you'd say, 'No, I'm not interested in him'. You had to make your own judgement on who you fancied and who you didn't." Never was that point illustrated better than in the case of Ali Dia, recruited by Graeme Souness at Southampton in 1996, after a phone call from a man claiming to be George Weah, saying Dia was his cousin and recommending him.

Redknapp says he received a similar call, and insists it *was* Weah who called him. "He rang me at the training ground – it was George Weah," he says. "He rang up and said, 'My cousin, good player, I've seen your team, you're a good team but you need a goalscorer'. I was saying, 'Oh yeah, OK George, lovely'. I thought it was a wind-up.

"I was going, 'Yeah alright, George, how are you doing at Milan now?' I thought it was someone having a laugh. Then suddenly he started telling me how Milan were going to play that year and the players he was playing with. I thought, 'Oh my God, it is him!' I was shocked. But, luckily, I didn't take his cousin. He ended up going to Southampton, didn't he, coming on after 20 minutes, then getting dragged off after 20 minutes..." It was Dia's only appearance for the south coast club.

SIGN GOOD CHARACTERS

A new signing can have talent, but if they disrupt the dressing room, they can be counterproductive.

"I used to meet the player and have a chat with him one-on-one, to see where he was coming from and what his ambitions were – was he interested in coming to play for your club, or was it just another move?" explains Redknapp.

"You get a feeling for them. I had players in and thought, 'I don't fancy him, he's not for me' when I met them. I had other people where I thought, 'I've got to get this lad, I love him, he'd be brilliant for me'.

"That's why I often took players around with me who I'd managed before – Crouchy (Peter Crouch), Jermain Defoe and Niko Kranjcar. Niko was a great player and a good person. I liked people like that, you knew they were good guys, they wanted to play, not a minute's problem around the place, they just got on with it. You need people like that. It's an easy job if you've got a good dressing room."



Above Redknapp often signed players he knew would not disrupt the dressing room, such as Crouch or Defoe (below)

GET DEADLINE DAY RIGHT

The transfer window only existed for the latter years of Redknapp's managerial career, but he became synonymous with it. No deadline day was complete without Redknapp peering out of the window of his Range Rover on his way into the training ground, explaining to a roving Sky Sports News reporter what his aims were for the hours ahead. ▸

Could the last day of the window be stressful? "It depends on what position in the league you're in," says Redknapp. "If you're going into a club that's struggling, trying to stay up and you know you need a couple of players or else you've got no chance, then it is stressful. If you've got a good squad and things are going well, unless you can get a player you think can really make the difference, there's no stress.

"At Tottenham, Daniel Levy used to love deadline day, he'd enjoy it. When I went back to Portsmouth the second time though, we were near the bottom of the league and it was about getting players in that might give us the chance to stay up.

"We did a deal with Daniel that January, taking three players from Tottenham (Pedro Mendes, Sean Davis and Noe Pamarot) who were great for me and made a difference. Then we picked up the little Argentinian boy Andres D'Alessandro on loan on deadline day, and he was fantastic.

"That was stressful because I inherited a bad side and you knew if you didn't change things around, if I didn't get some players in, I wasn't clever enough to keep them up, nor was anybody else. They could have got Sir Alex Ferguson in at the time and he wouldn't have kept them up. I had to do something, and that was change the players."

Redknapp kept Portsmouth up at the end of that 2005-06 campaign, winning the FA Cup two years later. By 2012-13 though, he found himself in a similar situation again at QPR – arriving at a club not long before Christmas, tasked with moving them out of the Premier League relegation zone. On deadline day, he signed Chris Samba plus Spurs duo Jermaine Jenas and Andros Townsend, but an attempt to recruit forward Peter Odemwingie from West Bromwich Albion infamously went wrong.

INSTEAD OF PARKING AT A HOTEL, ODEMWINGIE DROVE TO THE GROUND – AND THE SKY CAMERAS WERE THERE



With a deal not yet finalised between the clubs, Odemwingie unexpectedly turned up in a car outside Loftus Road, giving a live interview to a Sky Sports News journalist about what he thought was an imminent transfer. "I'm happy with the trust Harry Redknapp has shown in me," the Nigerian said. "I believe we can stay up." However, Odemwingie's appearance on Sky was a surprise to both QPR and West Brom. Upset he'd arrived at Loftus Road before a transfer had been agreed, the Baggies pulled the plug.

"Oh my God..." groans Redknapp, remembering the moment he saw Odemwingie on television. "I thought, 'Oh no, this could be trouble'. It wasn't his fault, what happened was a misunderstanding. He's a nice lad, I've met him a few times, but we were trying to do the deal and time was running out. I said to his agent, 'You'd better get yourself down here to London, otherwise we're going to run out of time by the time we get a deal done because we've not spoken about personal terms yet'. He had to meet the chief executive.

"But instead of driving to a hotel somewhere and parking up for a couple of hours in case the deal got done, they drove straight to the ground and the Sky cameras were outside. The chairman of West Brom was looking at the TV, watching it unfold, so that was the end of that deal."

Redknapp was unable to sign another forward that evening before the window

slammed shut (copyright Jim White, 2013). Odemwingie believed QPR could stay up – without him, they went down.

TAKE TOUGH DECISIONS

Management isn't just about signing players – it's also about knowing when to let them go. Sometimes, that means not letting sentimentality get in the way. That was the case when newly-minted Manchester City, then owned by Thaksin Shinawatra, bid to sign Benjani from Redknapp's Portsmouth in a £7.5m deal at the end of the 2008 winter transfer window.

There was just one problem – Benjani didn't want to go, so much so that various tales have since emerged, claiming the Zimbabwean was so reluctant to leave that he'd fallen asleep at the airport, missing a flight to Manchester. "I was awake the whole time!" Benjani later insisted and the deal went through just in time.

"Man City made a crazy offer," Redknapp says. "I was trying to get Jermain Defoe with the money, so Benji had to go, unfortunately. It wasn't easy, he enjoyed playing for Portsmouth and playing for me – the fans liked him, he was a real trier, he worked his socks off for the team. But the money was good, and we got him out in the end.

"I still love Benji though, I meet him for coffee and speak to him all the time. He's gone to Plymouth, working with the youth team. He'll be great – such a lovely man."





Above and right Benjani didn't want to leave Portsmouth for Manchester City **Below** Harry's deadline day signings kept Pompey up in 2006 and then won the FA Cup



Three years after his departure from Fratton Park, Benjani returned to Portsmouth for a second spell – by then though, Redknapp was gone and the club were in the Championship. He scored one goal in 18 games, before heading to South Africa with Chippa United.

PRAY YOUR RECRUITMENT CHIEF IS GOOD

Redknapp had control of transfers during his own managerial career – now, some bosses don't have that luxury.

Liverpool introduced a five-man transfer committee in 2012, comprising of manager Brendan Rodgers, the head of recruitment, the chief scout, the chief executive, plus the club's director of technical performance. Mauricio Pochettino left Chelsea in May amid friction over who decided which players to sign – co-sporting directors Paul Winstanley and Laurence Stewart held a lot of the sway.

Manchester United have reportedly been introducing a structure that reduces the manager's power over transfers, handing it to others at Old Trafford – the club recently recruited Dan Ashworth as sporting director and Jason Wilcox as technical director.

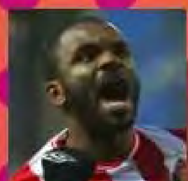
"It's different now, players are picked by the head of recruitment or whatever they call them – they used to be called a scout," says Redknapp. "Back in the day, no one signed players for Sir Alex, he signed his own players. No one would have had any input, he wouldn't have been listening to heads of recruitment or anybody else. I'm sure David Gill, who was a fantastic chief executive, never tried to tell Alex who he should sign.

"Now a manager is relying on other people. If their judgement is no good, you haven't got a chance. The players come from abroad, so when have you got a chance to go and watch them play? You're playing Saturday or Sunday, they're playing Saturday or Sunday, so you're relying on other people.

"I heard a chief executive saying recently they have a six-man committee, and the manager is a sixth of the committee. 'Does he have the final say?' he was asked. 'Oh no, he wouldn't have the final say, he has one-sixth of the say'. But who are these other people? Faceless people we don't know, choosing the players you're signing. That's how difficult it's become. The players are bought by other people and really all you're doing is coaching, but if players are no good, you can't coach them. When do you coach them? You're playing Saturday or Sunday, you play again Tuesday or Wednesday, you have a day off Thursday and then you have a warm-down... when do you have the time?

"People sometimes say, 'He's a great coach', but I'll be honest, I haven't seen many great coaches. I've seen great football people and great managers, but I haven't seen many great coaches. What is a great coach? What are they doing that's so different? I don't know. Getting the best out of people, picking the right people, putting them in the right positions. It ain't rocket science." For 34 years as a manager, it was a methodology that served Redknapp well.

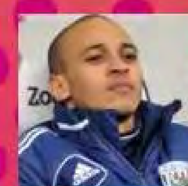








30 WEIRDEST TRANSFER MOMENTS

FFT remembers some of the strangest incidents, featuring riots, Lego, Twitter rants and would-be astronauts...

Words Tom Hancock


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30 PASCAL'S SWIFT REQUEST

After Wigan's defeat at Arsenal on the final day of 2005-06, Pascal Chimbonda submitted a transfer request in the dressing room, still in his kit. It didn't go down well – owner Dave Whelan threatened to put him in the reserves. **OUTCOME** Er, Whelan caved and sold him to Tottenham for £4.5 million later that summer.

29 FAUBERT TO REAL MADRID

Real Madrid made some odd post-Galactico additions – particularly Julien Faubert, who was loaned from West Ham late in the 2009 January transfer window. "His agent should be knighted!" said a stunned Paul Merson. **OUTCOME** Played twice and was accused of falling asleep on the bench during a match...

Above "I can't satisfy Cheryl's mad photoshoot fixation on just £55,000 a week"

28 CRASHLEY COLE

Ashley Cole left Arsenal for Chelsea in 2006, almost doing himself serious damage in the process. After being told the Gunners were offering him *only* a £55,000-a-week contract renewal, he "nearly swerved off the road". **HE SAID** "I was trembling with anger – I just couldn't believe what I'd heard." Horrifying.

27 ANGULO'S ARSENAL FEAR

In 2004, Miguel Angel Angulo was set to join Arsenal from Valencia – he'd even done the first part of his medical. Then, he surprisingly got cold feet (not picked up on the medical). **THEY SAID** "Fear overcame Miguel, that he couldn't fit in with the English lifestyle," said his agent. Was he terrified of fish and chips?

26 THE BABELCOPTER

Where did the helicopter take Ryan Babel on deadline day in 2010? Was he even onboard at all? Fevered reports insisted the Liverpool frontman was travelling by chopper to West Ham, but no move ever materialised. Weird. **OUTCOME** Stayed put for five more months, never shaking off the 'Babelcopter' memes.

25 BENJANI 'NODS OFF'

In 2008, Benjani signed for Manchester City – but didn't want to, according to Portsmouth boss Harry Redknapp. Sealing the deal shortly before the deadline, Pompey said he missed an earlier flight after snoozing at the airport. **HE SAID** "I didn't fall asleep, and that's the honest truth – I was awake the whole time."











24 "DO I WANNA GO TO HULL?"

Darren Bent was eager to go to Sunderland in 2009, saying so on Twitter. Accusing Spurs chairman Daniel Levy of holding things up, he raged, "Do I wanna go Hull NO. Do I wanna go Stoke NO. Do I wanna go Sunderland YES!" **OUTCOME** Did he go to Sunderland? YES, he did, scoring 36 goals in a season and a half.

23 BAGGIO STARTS A RIOT

One of the world's best footballers, Roberto Baggio literally caused a riot in Florence after Juventus broke the transfer record to poach him from Fiorentina for £8m in 1990. A total of 50 people were injured in the mayhem. **HE SAID** "I felt compelled to accept the Juve move." Fans felt compelled to create chaos...

22 A FAILED EYE TEST

In 2013, George Boyd was poised to complete a £500,000 switch to Nottingham Forest from Peterborough. The pact surprisingly collapsed owing to an "inconclusive eye test", leaving Posh bigwig Darragh MacAnthony apoplectic. **THEY SAID** "He scored from the halfway line the other month!" thundered MacAnthony.

21 "BUT I DON'T HAVE A SON?"

Former Fulham and Spurs midfielder Steed Malbranque was a Saint-Etienne player for four weeks before exiting in 2011 – leading to speculation that he'd retired because his son had cancer. It was certainly news to him. **THEY SAID** "Steed doesn't even have a son," declared a statement released on his behalf.

Above left "Nice goal George, but the game hasn't kicked off yet..."

20 TINO JILTS DARLO

A cult hero at Newcastle, Faustino Asprilla almost returned to the North East in 2002 – only to snub Darlington. Chairman George Reynolds had paraded him to Quakers fans, but the Colombian disappeared sharpish. **OUTCOME** Despite reports of a Middle East approach, he flew home to South America.

19 THE ARRIVAL OF BEBE

Jorge Mendes client Bebe notched a paltry four goals in the Portuguese second division in 2009-10 – that summer he joined Vitoria Guimaraes, then was immediately sold on to Manchester United for £7.4m. How bizarre. **OUTCOME** Selected seven times for United – he's now at Spain's Rayo Vallecano, aged 33.













18 HERRERA'S FAKE LAWYERS

Manchester United signed Ander Herrera in 2014, a year after 'lawyers' arrived at La Liga offices to pay a release clause, claiming to be his representatives. It delayed the deal, as neither Herrera nor United knew of them. **HE SAID** "They were trying to make a bit of easy money – I don't know how." Puzzling.

17 JARNI AT COVENTRY

Croatia's Robert Jarni was sent to Coventry from Real Betis in 1998 but rapidly rerouted to Real Madrid, amid suggestions that Betis wouldn't sell directly to Los Blancos. Actually, City received an offer they couldn't refuse. **OUTCOME** Cov made an £800,000 profit for zero appearances – not bad business, eh?

Above right Sol eyes up the 'Fire exit' sign at his Notts unveiling

16 SOL'S NOTTS LANDING

When Sol Campbell departed Premier League Portsmouth in 2009, no one saw him rocking up at League Two Notts County next. Like for Ulrika Jonsson and Faria Alam, director of football Sven-Goran Eriksson was the lure. **OUTCOME** Debuted for the Magpies against Morecambe, lost, then quit. That went well.

15 DE GEA AND THE FAX

Manchester United stopper David de Gea was Real Madrid-bound in 2015, until a dodgy fax machine stifled an exchange involving Keylor Navas. The device broke down, the deadline was missed and each club blamed the other. **OUTCOME** He remained at Old Trafford for eight more seasons, winning no league titles.

14 RONNIE'S PARTY CLAUSE

When Ronaldinho joined Flamengo in 2011, the 30-year-old's contract contained a rather unusual clause: he was permitted to go out partying two nights a week. Well, you've got to get your priorities in order, haven't you? **OUTCOME** His 16-month spell with the Rio club brought 28 goals and countless raves.

13 TEVEZ AND MASCHERANO

West Ham's 2006 double capture of Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano, ahead of top European clubs, shocked football – it soon transpired that the players were owned by third parties, resulting in major rule changes. **OUTCOME** They left within a year: Tevez to Manchester United, Mascherano to Liverpool.













Above Socrates steps onto the field for Garforth – nothing weird about this at all

12 ROBINHO GETS CONFUSED

Remember Chelsea swooping for Robinho in 2008? Probably not – they put a shirt with his name on their website, then got gazumped. "Chelsea had a great proposal – I accepted," remarked the Brazilian... at his City unveiling. **THEY SAID** "You mean Manchester, right?" Robinho: "Er, oh yeah, Manchester, sorry!"

11 ARSENAL'S DRINKING GAME

Herbert Chapman was a fine manager and a sneaky so-and-so. In talks to acquire David Jack in 1928, the Arsenal gaffer necked gin and tonics without the gin, ordering waiters to serve double measures to Bolton officials. **OUTCOME** Arsenal haggled the price down and Jack won three league titles for the club.

10 MIKEL'S MAN UNITED FAIL

In 2005, Chelsea and Manchester United both thought they'd landed Lyn's John Obi Mikel. He attended a press conference for the latter, then went missing, sparking a police search with Lyn suggesting he'd been kidnapped. He turned up in London, wanting to join Chelsea. **HE SAID** "Look, I wasn't really kidnapped..."

09 DIDI'S DOUBLE TRANSFER

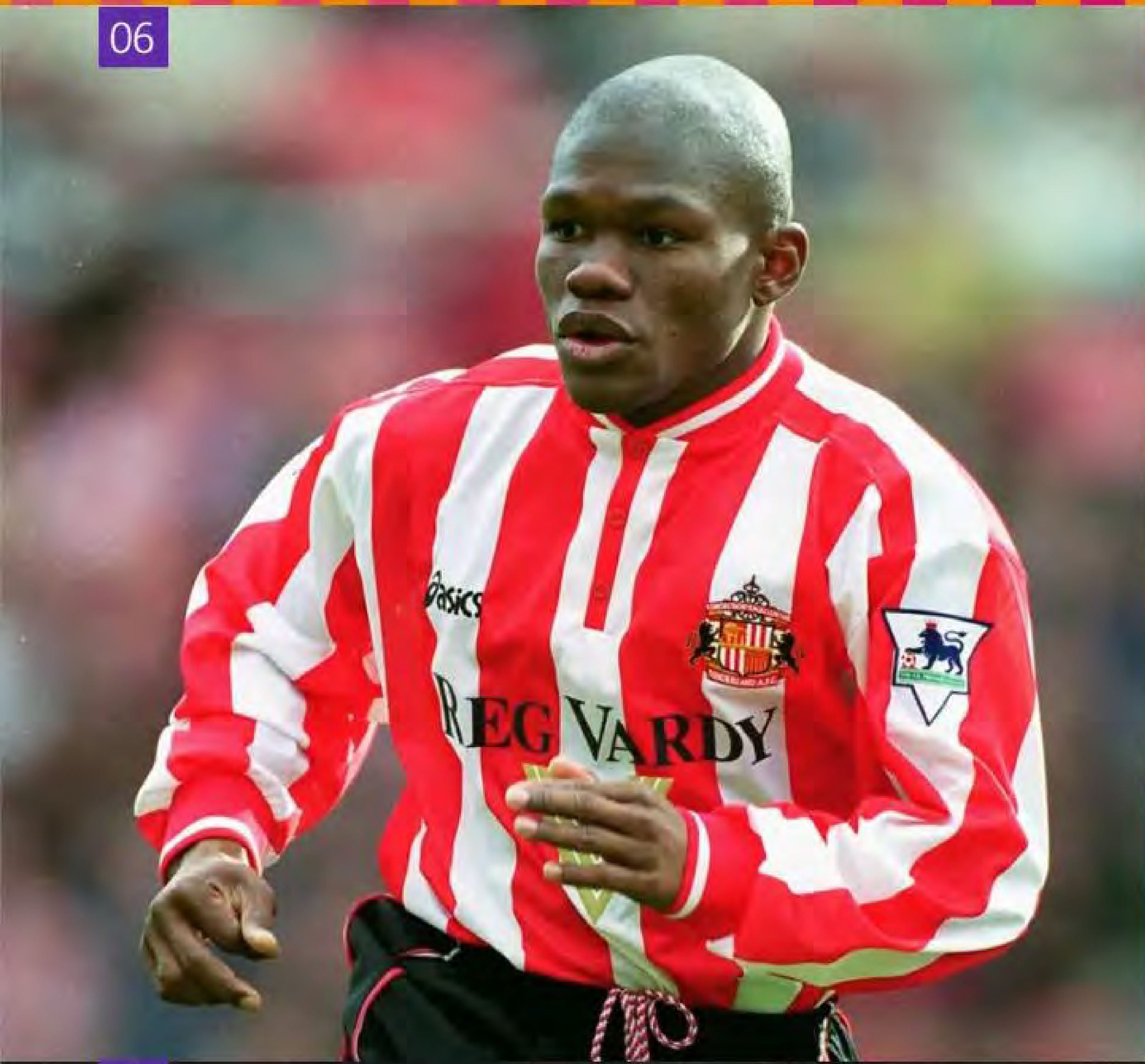
Didi Hamann became a Bolton player in 2006, but instantly regretted it. Amid rumours he'd walked into a McDonald's and been unable to understand the local accent, he relocated to... Manchester City for £400,000 a day later. **HE SAID** "As we were driving around Bolton, the sky turned black. The place looked bleak."

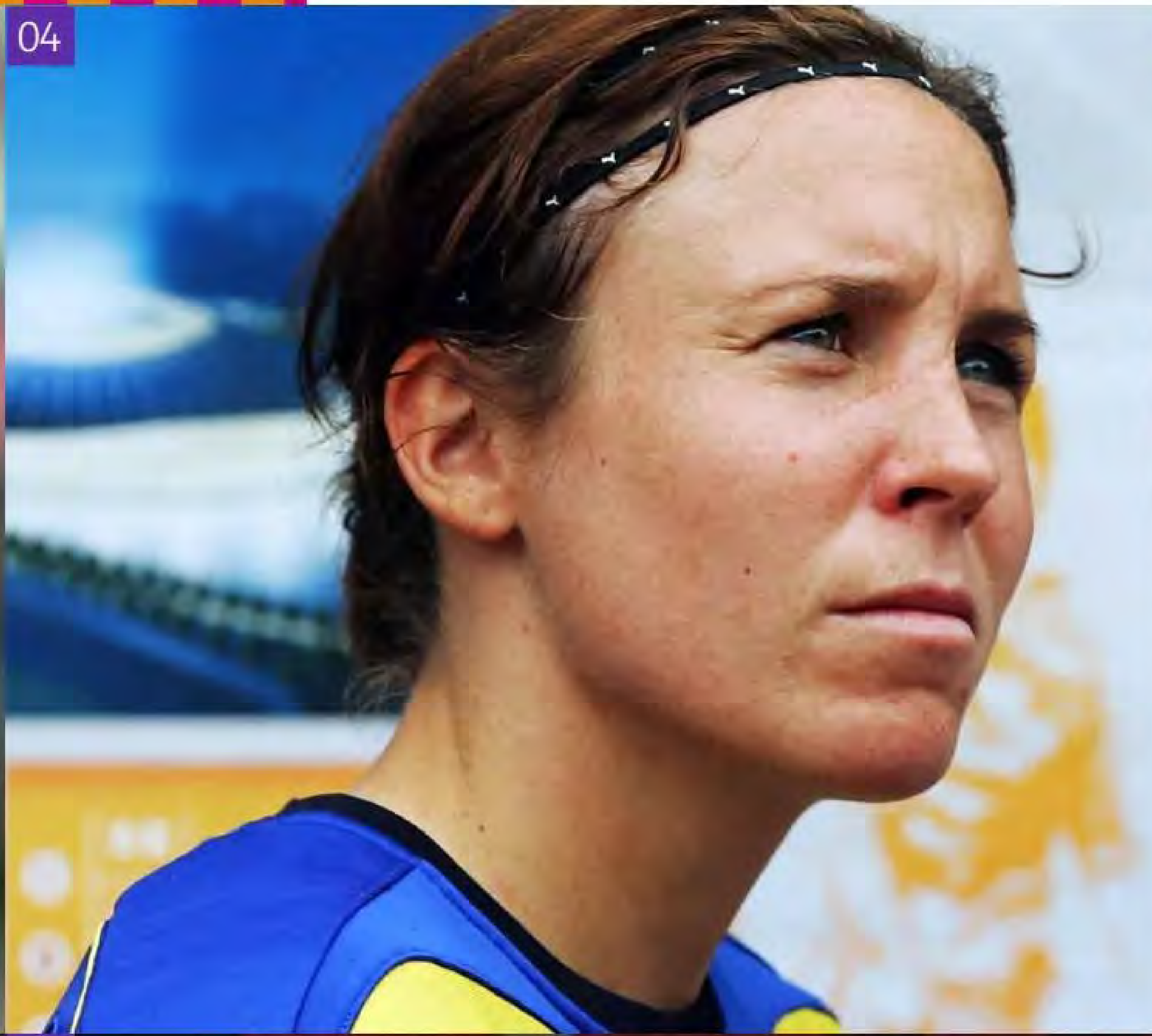
08 "COME BACK, TYRONE!"

After Derby's horrendous 2007-08 campaign, Tyrone Mears showed Houdini-esque escape skills – climbing out of a window at the club's training ground, sneaking off, then going on trial at Marseille without the Rams' blessing. **OUTCOME** Mears was fined six weeks' wages, but bagged a loan move to Marseille. Voila!

07 SOCRATES AT GARFORTH

Brazil icon Socrates spent most of his career in his homeland but did have two spells in Europe: at Fiorentina in 1984 and, er, in 2004, aged 50, at Yorkshire non-leaguers Garforth, who planned to reach the top flight by 2025. **OUTCOME** One substitute outing – Garforth are still eight tiers away from their dream...

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Above Signing for Sunderland was one step for man, one giant leap for mankind

06 MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Milton Nunez was out of his depth at Premier League Sunderland – no surprise, given the 5ft 5in striker said his signing was a mix-up with either fellow Honduran attacker Eduardo Bennett or PAOK colleague Adolfo Valencia. **HE SAID** "I don't know what I was doing at that club." Neither did the fans, to be honest...

05 THE LEGO CLAUSE

In 1996, forward Giuseppe Reina went from SG Wattenscheid 09 to Arminia Bielefeld and demanded his new club build him a house for every year of his contract. The club found a loophole – he got a house, made of Lego... **OUTCOME** Despite receiving a pristine Lego home, he sued the club, settling out of court.

04 PERUGIA'S WEIRD PLAN

After banishing on-loan Ahn Jung-hwan for eliminating Italy from the 2002 World Cup, Perugia brought in Colonel Gaddafi's son in 2003, then tried to snap up Sweden women's international Hanna Ljungberg. Why not? **OUTCOME** Ljungberg didn't want to play for a men's team, that's why not. Very strange.

03 SCHWARZ IN SPACE

Prior to Sunderland buying Stefan Schwarz from Valencia in 1999, the Swede had stated his desire to visit space. Leaving nothing to chance, Sunderland inserted a clause in his deal banning him from ever doing so. Phew. **OUTCOME** Schwarz didn't venture to space (or if he did, he did it incredibly secretively).

02 ODEMWINGIE'S MAD NIGHT

Peter Odemwingie delivered a deadline day moment for the ages in 2013 – turning up outside QPR's ground and having a chat live on Sky Sports News, even though no transfer had been agreed with his club West Brom. **OUTCOME** The Baggies weren't impressed; QPR weren't keen on letting him in. Awkward.

01 THE LEGEND OF ALI DIA

When a bloke purporting to be George Weah endorses an ex-Blyth Spartans striker, why wouldn't you sign him without seeing him in action? Graeme Souness did just that, taking Ali Dia to top-flight Southampton in 1996. **OUTCOME** Funnily enough, it wasn't Weah – Dia had one dismal run-out, then left. Oops.

THE RETURN OF THE GALACTICOS

Jude Bellingham, Vinicius Jr and Rodrygo helped Real Madrid to become continental champions yet again last season – now they've signed Kylian Mbappe and Brazilian teenage sensation Endrick, too. Can the new Galacticos fare better than their Noughties predecessors and dominate Europe for a generation?

Words Ed McCambridge
Additional reporting Felipe Rocha


16 de julio de 2024
Emirates

"Good afternoon, everyone. I'm going to try to speak Spanish."

As ice-breakers go, Kylian Mbappe's was about as well-rehearsed and effective as they come, eliciting a roar from the sun-kissed stands of the Santiago Bernabeu. After striding down a royal-blue catwalk leading to a stage in the centre of the pitch, Mbappe – flanked by club president Florentino Perez, the man who makes everything possible – delivered his coronation speech to 80,000 adoring Madridistas. "I spent endless nights dreaming about this," he beamed. "Today, I'm one happy guy."

Tickets to the event had sold out two days in advance. Growing up on the outskirts of Paris, a young Mbappe had slept beneath posters of Cristiano Ronaldo on his bedroom wall; now he was standing in the same spot where his idol had stood 15 years earlier, his No.9 shirt having sold twice as many replicas as Ronaldo's No.9 had by the time of their respective unveilings (the No.7 shirt still belonged to Raul at that time).

The Frenchman volleyed footballs into the stands and posed for selfies with those lucky enough to have secured front-row seats. Here he was, at last, adorning the venerated all-white of Real Madrid.

Yet this was more than a welcome party. It was a declaration of war. Mbappe's capture wasn't the result of a super-club looking to rekindle its glory days, but the reigning Spanish and European champions bolstering an already superstar squad with the world's most feared attacker.

Nor was Mbappe recruited to refresh an ageing frontline. Real Madrid's success last term was, in large part, thanks to a trio of young forwards – Vinicius Junior, Rodrygo and Jude Bellingham, who bagged 64 goals and 33 assists between them as Los Blancos secured their second Liga and Champions League double in the past three seasons. At 25, Mbappe is older than all three of them.

Other clubs wouldn't have considered signing yet another star forward. Real Madrid signed two. Joining Mbappe is Endrick, the teenage sensation from Palmeiras in Brazil, whose £52m transfer was arranged in 2022 but completed only now he has turned 18.

Along with Bellingham, Vinicius Jr and Rodrygo, the new arrivals are already being dubbed the new 'Galacticos', taking on the label once carried by Real Madrid's star-studded post-millennium team that included Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo, Ronaldo, David Beckham, Raul and Roberto Carlos.

"This is absolutely a new Galacticos era," *Marca*'s Real Madrid correspondent, Joel del Rio Muradas, tells *FourFourTwo*. "Florentino Perez has brought together three of the four most valuable players in world football: Mbappe, Vinicius Jr and Bellingham. Add to that Endrick and Rodrygo, plus other world-class players such as Thibaut Courtois, Luka Modric, Aurelien Tchouameni and Federico Valverde, and this team must be considered as the Galacticos 2.0 – a whole constellation of stars, led by the best coach in the world in Carlo Ancelotti."

As Mbappe wiped the tears from his eyes and led a rousing chorus of "Hala Madrid!", there was a sense that the final piece of the puzzle was in place. It was easy to forget how long this transfer was in the making.

"I'M IN ZIZOU'S CAR!"

The charm offensive began way back in 2012, when Mbappe was still a promising 13-year-old honing his craft at France's prestigious Clairefontaine academy. Some scintillating performances against Europe's top youth sides, from Real Madrid and Bayern Munich to Liverpool and Chelsea, prompted a phone call – not to Clairefontaine but to Parisian semi-professional side AS Bondy, coached by Cameroonian Wilfried Mbappe, father of Kylian. "Zinedine Zidane would like to see your son," a representative from the Spanish icons told an incredulous Mbappe Sr.

When arguably the greatest player in your adopted nation's history demands a meeting with your sprog, there's only one response. The Mbappes were off to Spain.

"I'll never forget the moment we arrived at the airport," Mbappe later recalled. "Zidane met us in the parking lot in a nice car. He offered to drive me to training, pointing at the front seat and saying, 'Go on, get in'."

Starstruck, Mbappe asked the legendary playmaker if he should remove his shoes first, causing the World Cup winner to laugh and shake his head. Mbappe recalled, "I was just thinking to myself: 'I'm in Zizou's car. I'm Kylian from Bondy. This isn't real – I must still be sleeping on the plane.'"

Mbappe was given a private tour of Real Madrid's glimmering Valdebebas training centre by Zidane himself, before being taken to meet his idol, Cristiano Ronaldo. The pair posed for what has since become a famous photograph: a princeling, clad in a full Real Madrid tracksuit, beaming alongside the king. The teenager joined a training session before heading home with Zidane's assurances that he'd be welcomed back soon enough. Yet it



"THIS IS ABSOLUTELY A NEW GALACTICOS ERA: A CONSTELLATION OF STARS, LED BY THE BEST COACH IN THE WORLD"





would be more than a decade before the youngster returned as a Real Madrid player.

For the Mbappes, education came first. It was decided that their middle son should remain in France until the completion of his studies – which, at his own insistence, would now include Spanish lessons. After rejecting Real Madrid, a 14-year-old Mbappe signed instead for Ligue 1 outfit Monaco.

"It was in the principality that he transformed into the hottest prospect in world football," Spanish football expert Guillem Balague tells *FFT*. "He broke into their first team as a 16-year-old and surprised everyone with his pace, his directness and his hunger to score goals. This was an extraordinary young footballer. There was huge hype around him all over Europe."

After Mbappe helped Monaco to a shock Ligue 1 triumph and a Champions League semi-final as an 18-year-old in 2016-17,

Above and left "Today, I'm one happy guy," Kylian Mbappe tells 80,000 Madridistas; Zidane and Perez finally get their man

Real Madrid made their first official bid. A £165m offer was accepted by Monaco but, again, Mbappe's family thwarted the deal, because the player's father was concerned that first-team minutes could be harder to come by in the Spanish capital.

The Qatari-backed Paris Saint-Germain swooped, confirming a season-long loan that would become a permanent £165m deal the following summer. With Barcelona star Neymar also arriving in the summer of 2017 for £200m, it represented an unprecedented summer outlay.

Over the next four years, Mbappe morphed into a superstar and serial winner, picking up three Ligue 1 titles, three Coupes de France and the World Cup with Les Bleus in 2018, the 19-year-old being named Best Young Player as he scored four goals, including one in the final. But in the summer of 2021, with a year left on his PSG deal, rumours began to swirl that he was seeking a new challenge.

Real Madrid tabled two offers in quick succession, of £137m and £154m. Both were rejected by PSG, who had just signed Lionel Messi from Barcelona and were intent on winning their first Champions League title.

In doing so, the Parisians made it clear that they were willing to risk losing their talisman for nothing a year later, rather than allow Real Madrid to force their hand. Their hope was that Mbappe could be tempted to sign fresh terms. But as the 2021-22 campaign drew to a close, it was suggested that the Spaniards had reached an agreement with the player, including a signing bonus of around £130m in lieu of any transfer fee owed to PSG. At last, it seemed, Florentino Perez had got his man.

"In nine years as a *Marca* journalist, I had never seen a transfer saga of this magnitude," Del Rio Muradas recalls. "Our readers were asking us for Mbappe updates all of the time. It dominated the paper every day. Finally, it looked to be happening."

Then, in May, the unthinkable happened. French media suddenly announced that Mbappe had signed a new two-year deal with PSG, including an option to extend for a third season, becoming the highest-paid player on the planet in the process. Reports said he would earn more than £1m per week and even have an input into transfer targets.

Mbappe's future had become a national issue in France. Calls for him to remain at PSG even came from the country's highest office. "I never imagined that I was going to talk to President Emmanuel Macron about the future of my career, so it's kind of crazy," Mbappe revealed after putting pen to paper. "He told me, 'I want you to stay – you are very important for the country'." ▸

Real Madrid had again missed out on this player who had looked destined to become a Madridista, and a dream signing in terms of talent and age but also in global appeal. President Perez – the man responsible for assembling his club's first Galacticos side decades earlier – seethed, telling fans that Mbappe "would be sorry" for his decision.

"It hurt him because he trusted Mbappe's word," Del Rio Muradas explains. "It seemed that the deal was closed, but then he renewed. Sometimes our readers think we're toying with them, but that's not the case. Mbappe himself acknowledges that he was very close to joining Madrid two years ago."

Just four months later, however, fresh reports claimed that Mbappe felt "betrayed" by PSG over a number of key decisions. "The club promised they would sign a new striker so that Mbappe could play in his best position off the striker, that Neymar would be sold, that they'd sign a centre-back and that he'd be at the centre of the project," said French football expert Julien Laurens at the time. "None of those things happened."

Directly after the 2022 World Cup, in which he scored the most goals in a tournament since 2002 and the first hat-trick in a final since 1966, as France lost to Argentina, rumours swirled that Mbappe wanted out for real this time. Los Blancos made tentative enquiries but, having felt misled by the player six months earlier, no offer was forthcoming.

By the summer, with Mbappe then entering the final 12 months of his contract and informing PSG that he wouldn't be activating his extra year, the French club ramped up the pressure to sign a new deal, excluding him from their summer tour of Japan.

"If Kylian wants to stay, he needs to sign a new contract," club president Nasser Al-Khelaifi sniffed. "We don't want to lose the best player in the world for free." Right on cue, an offer landed on their desks. This time, however, it didn't come from Madrid, nor indeed any club in Europe.

Saudi Arabian outfit Al-Hilal submitted a world-record bid, understood to be worth £259m. What's more, they weren't even seeking a long-term arrangement, indicating that they were willing to pay the World Cup Golden Boot winner £170m – rising to nearer £600m with commercial arrangements – for a one-season stay.

Admirably, Mbappe was unmoved. As the 2023-24 season got underway, and the forward reclaimed his place in PSG's team despite refusing contract negotiations, Europe's elite clubs began to circle. Arsenal's Mikel Arteta insisted his club "needed to be part of the conversation" and Jurgen Klopp said that only money would hold Liverpool back from pursuing the PSG star. In reality, though, it always felt like a one-horse race.

In February 2024, four months before his contract was set to expire, *Marca* reported that Mbappe had officially agreed terms with Real Madrid. By March, those terms had been revealed: a £128m fee with a further £13m a year in salary after tax, plus image rights.

By June, the contract was signed, 12 years after the hunt began. Finally, the Frenchman was ready to be unveiled. The Bernabeu was prepared for his coronation – the stage set, the catwalk unfurled. Kylian Mbappe was Real Madrid's at long last.

THE NEXT BRAZILIAN SUPERSTAR

By comparison, Real Madrid's other major summer arrival was relatively straightforward, the transfer having been agreed 18 months earlier, midway through the World Cup. While Mbappe was lighting up Qatar, Los Blancos revealed they had pipped a number of European super-clubs to the signature of Palmeiras forward Endrick, then only 16 years old.

The teenager was already being touted as a future superstar, despite having only just broken into the Palmeiras first team. If three goals in his first seven senior appearances weren't ample evidence of his qualities, a reported 170 goals in 172 academy showings went some way in explaining the extraordinary hype.

Real Madrid's decision to activate Endrick's £52m release clause raised a few eyebrows (Palmeiras president Leila Pereira described the deal as "the biggest negotiation in the history of Brazilian football"). But those who had watched his development closely knew the player that Carlo Ancelotti was getting.

"The boy is special, no doubt about it," former Brazil, Santos and Manchester City star Elano tells *FFT*. "He belongs to that group of super-talented players that Brazil has produced in the past: Neymar, Ronaldinho, Ronaldo and others. He's another rare case of a youngster who convinces everyone they're special; youngsters born with incredible talent.

"The main thing is the mental power he has at such a young age – his psychological strength. I'd also emphasise his impressive physicality and his nose for goal. It's unusual to see a player of his age with his maturity.

"Endrick is the whole package: technical quality, combined with physical strength and great mental power."

Just before sealing a second consecutive Brazilian top-flight title with Palmeiras, the youth international was handed a first senior Selecao call-up by caretaker manager Fernando Diniz in November 2023. Making his debut against Colombia in qualification for the 2026 World Cup, he became Brazil's youngest debutant in 57 years, at the age of 17 years, three months and 27 days. He then bagged his first goal in a Wembley friendly against England in March, becoming the youngest male player to score for club or country at the stadium. He backed it up by scoring again in a 3-3 draw with Spain three days later, then another against Mexico on his next appearance in June.

"It's no wonder he quickly got onto the national team's radar," Elano says. "From the age of 16, he was already playing at the highest level in Brazil, being decisive in big games, scoring goals and winning titles with Palmeiras. He was an important figure in those achievements, too."

As with any youngster, there's still a lot to learn. In the 2022 Sao Paulo Youth Cup Final, Endrick sparked a physical altercation by attempting a rainbow flick over an opponent near the corner flag. Last November, he appeared to punch an opponent to the ground following a tussle on the halfway line. But Elano, who was capped 50 times by Brazil between 2004 and 2011, believes they're just natural teething problems.

"I don't see any provocation on his part," the former midfielder explains. "There are

THE ORIGINAL GALACTICOS





Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo, Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos were four of the biggest stars of Real Madrid's first Galacticos era. *FourFourTwo* sat down with them for two cover stories, 10 years apart.

Having met up with the quartet in early 2003, shortly before David Beckham joined the Bernabeu party, *FFT* tracked the four down again in 2013, to chat about that cover and their recollections of a memorable era.

"I'm older now and I've got less hair," Zidane chuckled, looking back at the 2003 cover. "I was lucky to be able to play with those players. I experienced something very special with them, at the world's best club."

Figo concurred. "When I look at that 2003 magazine cover, I think of the good atmosphere, the talent and the friendship," he said. "Look at us: it looks like everyone is laughing. It was a lovely time."





Below Because signing Mbappe wasn't enough, Madrid have also snapped up 18-year-old star Endrick from Brazil **Right** Oh yeah, and Jude's still there as well

"MBAPPE ARRIVING MEANS JUDE MIGHT PLAY MORE OF A MIDFIELD ROLE. HIS GOALS AND ASSISTS MAY SUFFER, BUT THE TEAM COULD BE BETTER FOR IT"

more important things than worrying about whether a player is lashing out or dribbling at the right time or the wrong time. With youngsters of the calibre of Endrick or Neymar, trying to stand out in Brazil, it is normal for them to overdo it at some point. They learn over time, with the help of more experienced professionals. I really don't see anything wrong with those displays of talent or aggression. It's part of the show."

Now the aim is for Endrick, who bizarrely lists Bobby Charlton as a childhood hero, to continue his development at a club where he may not be considered a guaranteed starter.

"He was an important player at Palmeiras and that created the ideal setting for his talent to flourish," Elano explains. "At Real Madrid, he'll have to earn his place by seizing the opportunities that come his way. He has the talent for it, and Real Madrid having a few Brazilians already will help him to adapt."

"MADRID ARE STILL THE BIGGEST DRAW"

Indeed, Endrick's signing closely mirrored Real Madrid's previous captures of Vinicius Jr and Rodrygo. That pair also arrived as highly-coveted 18-year-olds from Brazilian clubs – Flamengo and Santos respectively.

They didn't come cheap, either: Vinicius arrived in 2018 for £39m and Rodrygo jetted in a year later for around £40m. Together at the Bernabeu, the wingers have evolved into world-beaters, winning two Champions Leagues and three La Liga titles apiece.

Last season represented a high water mark for both. Rodrygo bagged 17 goals and nine assists in all competitions, and scored home and away in March's Champions League quarter-final triumph over Manchester City.

Vinicius, meanwhile, continued his rise to the summit of world football with 24 goals in 39 appearances, including the second in Real Madrid's 2-0 victory over Borussia Dortmund in the 2024 Champions League Final. It was the second time that the Brazilian had scored in the biggest club game in European football, following his winner against Liverpool in 2022. Those performances have made him the favourite to win the Ballon d'Or, not least with Rio Ferdinand, but his contributions away from the pitch have created their own legacy.

Spanish football's ongoing problem with racism has met its match in Vinicius. Having been continuously targeted by racist abuse inside and outside football grounds – an effigy wearing his jersey was hanged from ▸



“IT’S A PLEASURE TO SEE YOUNG BRAZILIANS HAVE A STARRING ROLE FOR REAL MADRID. VINI AND RODRYGO HAVE MADE HISTORY THERE”



a Madrid bridge in 2023 – the 24-year-old has demanded tougher punishments for culprits.

It’s not been an easy ride, with La Liga president Javier Tebas unhelpfully branding the player’s complaints as “insulting” to the organisation’s efforts – yet Vinicius has continued to passionately call for change, even breaking down in tears during one press conference in March.

“He hadn’t been considered a leader within the Real Madrid dressing room previously,” journalist Balague tells *FFT*. “But his ongoing fight against football’s racists has seen him take on greater responsibility.”

As Vinicius and Rodrygo continue to flourish on and off the field, those back in Brazil have come to see Los Blancos as the ultimate finishing school for their brightest talents. “They’re players that everyone likes to watch, and Brazil is happy to see them shine,” says Elano, who coached a young Rodrygo at Santos. “So, it’s a pleasure to see these youngsters playing a starring role for Real Madrid. It’s not easy to build a legacy there, but Rodrygo and Vini have already made a lot of history there.”

Last term saw the Samba duo dovetail spectacularly in attack, together with Englishman Jude Bellingham, Real Madrid’s big 2023 signing from Borussia Dortmund. Bellingham was only 20 at the time but he’d been expected to make an impact in Spain’s capital after shining in the Bundesliga; very few people, however, could have foreseen how crucial he would become, so quickly.

The Birmingham City youth product’s debut campaign, in which he sometimes operated in what was near enough an unfamiliar false nine role, brought 23 goals and 13 assists in all competitions. Highlights included late winners in both of the Clasico league fixtures against Barcelona and collecting the Kopa Trophy for the world’s best young player at the 2023 Ballon d’Or ceremony. In May, Ancelotti dubbed the Englishman “the best in the world”.

“Jude quickly elevated himself into one of the world’s great players, for club and country,” former Real Madrid and England striker Michael Owen tells *FFT*. “At Real, he has developed that big-game energy, that swagger, that attitude. We saw it for England at Euro 2024 as well. Playing for a club like Real Madrid isn’t easy when all eyes are on you and every poor performance is pounced upon; if you can respond to that and stay at the highest level, then you belong with the best in the world. He’s incredible.”

At the time of his signing, Bellingham could have gone almost anywhere in the world, having held talks with Liverpool and Manchester City before plumping for Real Madrid. His £88.5m transfer fee has looked more like a bargain with each passing week. Similarly, the fees splashed out for both Vinicius and Rodrygo are seen as absolute steals in hindsight.

Clockwise from above Vini and Rodrygo; don’t throw it, Jude; kings of Europe... again; Rudiger is “a great guy”, says Ancelotti; will young Turkish talent Arda Guler still get minutes?

Given Real Madrid’s track record, it seems highly likely that Mbappe’s free transfer (even with a huge signing bonus factored in) and the sum paid for Endrick will come to be considered smart investments. The club’s considered approach to transfers has been crucial in keeping them at the summit of world football, despite paying off heavy debts, keeping onside of UEFA’s profitability rules and funding a £1.5bn redevelopment of the Bernabeu, completed in September 2023.

“They’ve had to be very savvy in the market in recent years,” Balague explains. “They’ve kept clear of bidding wars and only gone after players they’re absolutely certain on. Gradually, they have brought their debts under control while making improvements to their squad and facilities. It’s impressive.”

Despite Forbes naming them the world’s richest football club in July – a 2023-24 revenue of £713m putting them top for the first time since 2017-18 – money is tight, as evidenced by Perez’s persistent wrangling for the foundation of a European Super League.

“In terms of on-field success, marketing and merchandise, they’re ahead of rivals,” Balague says. “But they’re competing with clubs backed by billionaires and entire states: the likes of Manchester City, PSG, even Newcastle. They’re unable to offer the type of fees others can. The European Super League is seen as a way to redress that balance.”

So, how are Real Madrid still pipping those clubs to the likes of Mbappe, Endrick and Bellingham? “Prestige,” Balague states, matter-of-factly. “We’ve seen again and again that when it comes to prestige, Real





Madrid are ahead of everybody else. Mbappe, Endrick, Bellingham and other stars could have gone anywhere, and could have earned more money elsewhere. But the white shirt, the history and the ambition of Real Madrid is something no other club can compete with. They're still the biggest draw."

BATTLE FOR THE BALLON D'OR

The burning question now is how – or even if – all of Mbappe, Vinicius, Bellingham, Endrick and Rodrygo can play together. Ancelotti found success last season playing a 4-4-2 diamond, sometimes switching to 4-3-3. There simply isn't room for every member of that quintet in his frontline. Balague believes that the mistakes of history must be learned.

"The original Galacticos team often featured all of Zidane, Ronaldo, Raul, Figo and Beckham – and Roberto Carlos bombed forward as well," Balague recalls. "President Perez demanded that his gems play every match. It was a thrilling spectacle when it clicked, but they were defensively vulnerable and won little silverware. Ancelotti needs to find a better balance with this team."

When all are fit and firing, sacrifices will surely have to be made. One man, however, may be exempt. "Dropping Mbappe isn't an option," says Balague. "He arrives as one of the greatest players in the world – a transfer years in the making. He'll probably start at centre-forward with a Brazilian on either side. Vinicius Jr is too good to leave out on the left-hand side. That leaves Rodrygo and Endrick fighting it out on the right.

"You also have to factor in Real Madrid's other youngsters, such as Arda Guler, who had a brilliant Euro 2024 with Turkey. He'll also fight for game time. But Mbappe is nailed on, I believe."

What, then, of Bellingham, who shone in an advanced central role last season? Having previously starred as a midfielder for Dortmund, the 21-year-old could be moved back alongside the likes of Eduardo Camavinga, Tchouameni and Valverde. That switch would be made smoother by the recent retirement of veteran playmaker Toni Kroos and the declining powers of Modric, who turns 39 in early September.

"The arrival of Mbappe means Jude might have to give way a bit and play in a role that he hasn't been used to playing since he joined Real Madrid," says Owen, who scored 16 times in 45 appearances for the club.

"I think he'll be more box-to-box now – more of a midfielder. His numbers in terms of goals and assists will suffer, but the team might be better for it overall."

Whatever his position, Bellingham will surely expect to share the limelight a bit more this season. The Stourbridge native emerged as Real Madrid's matchwinner and *de facto* on-pitch leader in 2023-24, but Mbappe's arrival will challenge that status. On the club's pre-season tour of the USA, Ancelotti – a dab hand at managing big egos – insisted Bellingham will still be a key man.

"Nothing changes for Jude," the Italian told reporters. "The first season, he surprised me, because he showed fantastic quality and maturity. This season will be no different. He is one of the best players we have and he'll support the team with his quality."

Ancelotti's famed peace-keeping powers appeared to be called upon during that tour – which included neither Mbappe nor Bellingham, following their Euro 2024 exploits – as rumours emerged of a spat between Endrick and veteran centre-back Antonio Rudiger. The German defender, known for his physicality, was filmed barging the teenager a little overzealously, which reportedly led to a dressing room bust-up.

"An issue between Rudiger and Endrick?" asked Ancelotti, adopting a look of comical mock surprise. "No, no – nothing happened. Rudiger just 'welcomed' Endrick to the team. He'll do the same when Mbappe comes. Antonio's a great guy."

Ancelotti may be skilled when it comes to keeping superstar squads harmonious, but it's the presence of another figure that truly ensures hierarchy is respected. "Nobody at Real Madrid comes close to President Perez in terms of ego," Balague tells *FFT*. "He's the boss and, when players sign for Real, it is made clear that they are there to represent the badge before themselves.

"It works, too. Perez is the reason so many superstars can play together."

Even so, Real Madrid's quintet of new Galacticos will undoubtedly have one eye on personal glory while they bid for collective silverware. Of the past 10 winners of the men's Ballon d'Or, six were representing Los Blancos at the time. The other four were won by Lionel Messi. While Vinicius is the frontrunner for this year's gong, Bellingham has also been in contention and Mbappe, who witnessed first-hand Neymar's failed attempts to win the prize during their time together at PSG, knows he is now ideally placed to challenge in the years ahead.

"There's no denying that would have been a factor in his decision to join Real Madrid," Balague says. "Ronaldo, Modric and Karim Benzema have all been honoured in recent years after shining for Real Madrid. Mbappe wants that status soon."

Naturally, Los Blancos are hot favourites to win every competition they're in this term, including another Champions League title to take their overall tally to 16. The club lifted Big Ears in 2002 with Zidane, Figo, Raul and Roberto Carlos in the side, but were unable to repeat the feat after adding Ronaldo Nazario that summer and Beckham a year later. Perez's first generation of Galacticos ultimately fell short, at least in terms of trophies won. But the current crop appears better placed to succeed.

"The first Galacticos changed the entire football industry," says Marca's Del Rio Muradas. "But the new Galacticos can dominate from both a marketing *and* a footballing standpoint. This team is far more balanced in all positions, and that's important when you have so many stars in the team. I truly believe they have the potential to win everything. I don't think we are yet aware of the full scale of what Real Madrid have created."

The term 'Galacticos' still elicits images of the icons of yesteryear. However, in Mbappe, Bellingham, Vinicius, Rodrygo and Endrick a new cast is ready to take up that mantle.

A new Galacticos era has arrived.

FOLLOW THAT!

After a 12-year wait for *La Decima*, Real Madrid have won the Champions League in six of the past 11 seasons

2013-14	**WINNERS**
2014-15	**Semi-final**
2015-16	**WINNERS**
2016-17	**WINNERS**
2017-18	**WINNERS**
2018-19	**Last 16**
2019-20	**Last 16**
2020-21	**Semi-final**
2021-22	**WINNERS**
2022-23	**Semi-final**
2023-24	**WINNERS**





EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Europe's biggest club competition has become even bigger – *FFT* explains what to look out for in the revamped format, including Thursday night matches, chess and French pirates

Words Chris Flanagan



EXTRA QUALIFYING SPOTS HAVE GONE TO SURPRISE PACKAGES, AS BOLOGNA AND BREST MAKE DEBUTS

MORE TEAMS

For the first time since the 1998-99 season, the Champions League proper will not begin with 32 clubs. Back in 1999, the competition expanded from 24 teams; this year, it has increased again to 36.

So, where do the four extra teams come from? There was one extra place available via the qualifying rounds, while the two best-performing countries in European competition last term each received another spot. England had an unexpectedly poor season on the continent – Aston Villa were the only Premier League club to reach a European semi-final – so those places went to Italy and Germany. This meant that Borussia Dortmund, Champions League runners-up in 2023-24, qualified despite finishing fifth in the Bundesliga.

It also benefited Bologna, fifth in Serie A, who will play in the Champions League for the first time – though they've lost the boss who upset the odds to get them there, with Thiago Motta having joined Juventus. He has been replaced by the appropriately-named Vincenzo Italiano, who took Fiorentina to the Conference League final in each of the past two seasons. Scotland international Lewis Ferguson was made Bologna captain last season but injured his ACL in April and isn't due back until the end of the year.

The fourth extra Champions League spot went to Europe's fifth-best league, Ligue 1, helping another surprise package to qualify. Brest (below) finished third in the French top tier, their highest-ever placing, thanks in no small part to the managerial skills of former Sunderland midfielder Eric Roy – Les Pirates have few stars and their ground on the Brittany coast holds fewer than 16,000 fans.

It's not just the Champions League that's expanded to 36 teams, either; so, too, have the Europa League and Conference League, now officially renamed from the not-at-all clunky Europa Conference League. ▸





PREVIOUSLY, THERE WAS AN OPEN DRAW FROM THE QUARTER-FINALS ONWARDS – THAT'S GONE AS WELL

MORE CONFUSION

The Champions League group phase is no more, so forget the traditional groups of four, which had been in place since the competition's formation in 1992. Some were concerned that it was a tired format, with too many dead rubbers in the weeks before Christmas, and it has been replaced by the 'league phase' – every team involved goes into one big 36-team division. You may have heard it called the 'Swiss system', as a similar format has been used for various sporting competitions and takes its origins from a chess tournament in Zurich in 1895.

Now, read this carefully because we shall explain it only once. As with any competition UEFA dream up these days (Nations League, we're looking at you), the new league phase of the Champions League is complicated.

At the end of the 36-teams-in-one-group group stage, the overall top eight will advance straight to the last 16. The sides finishing ninth to 24th will go into a play-off round, while the clubs finishing 25th to 36th will be eliminated. The play-off round will be seeded: ninth or 10th will face 23rd or 24th, determined by a draw, while 11th or 12th will face 21st or 22nd, and so on.

The winners of each play-off round tie will progress to the last 16 – also seeded, to ensure that the team that finished first in the league phase will face one that finished 15th, 16th, 17th or 18th. The side that finished eighth in the league phase will play a team that finished ninth, 10th, 23rd or 24th. Confused? That's numberwang!

Previously, there was an open draw from the quarter-finals onwards. That's gone, too. Again, it's seeded, like a tennis draw, so that the teams who finished first and second in the league phase will be in opposite halves of the draw, unable to play each other until the final on May 31, and unable to face the teams who finished third or fourth until the semis. It means that the finishing positions of the league phase could be critical to who ends up winning the competition. The knockout stages of the Europa League and Conference League also follow this format.



Clockwise from top The new setup is going to captivate fans across the globe; Girona are set for their debut; Juventus return; Stuttgart will be mixing it with the elite again; the expanded format means Dortmund fans won't have to just watch on TV

MORE MATCHES

Obviously, the idea behind this new format was to increase the total number of matches in the Champions League, with the intention of increasing the value of television rights, as well as bringing in more gate receipts. It was largely a concession to Europe's top clubs; an attempt to head off agitations for a European Super League, while keeping the competition under UEFA's control, with no need for a breakaway event that could cost the governing body prestige – and a fortune.

Including the new play-off round, the knockout stage now has 45 matches, up from 29. The league phase has 144 matches, up from 96. That's because not only are there more teams, but each club will play eight fixtures in the league phase, compared to six as before. Whereas clubs previously played the same opposition both home and away, the eight matches will now be against eight different opponents – four at home, four away. Each team will play two games against teams from pot one (one at home, one away), two from pot two, two from pot three and two from pot four.

So, when are they fitting in the extra two matchdays, to allow each team to play eight times? The last two midweeks in January, that's when. Then comes the draw for the play-off round (don't forget the play-off round), with those matches taking place in February before the last 16 starts in March.

The Europa League follows the same schedule, with one exception. To give each competition a proper launch week of its own, the first matches of the Champions League take place from September 17 to 19: that's Tuesday, Wednesday and, shockingly, Thursday. The first matches of the Europa League take place on September 25 and 26.

The Conference League's knockout schedule copies the other two competitions, but the league phase is different: because

there isn't the same money-making potential (let's be honest here), each team plays only six times. To facilitate that, the league phase draw has divided clubs into six pots rather than four, and teams will play six different opponents. The Conference League starts on October 3, with the sixth and final set of group fixtures taking place in a midweek of its own, with no Champions League or Europa League action, on December 19.

NO DROPDOWN

You may have noticed no mention of beaten Champions League teams dropping into the Europa League mid-season. That's because they aren't going to. Since 1999, teams who finished third in their Champions League group headed into the UEFA Cup or Europa League, and in 25 seasons, that produced nine UEFA Cup or Europa League winners who had started the campaign in the Champions League group stage – among them, Chelsea in 2013 and Sevilla twice.

Sadly, Sevilla's perennial cunning plan to finish third in their Champions League group and then lift the Europa League yet again has now been foiled (although they finished 14th in La Liga last term, so there was no danger of them qualifying for Europe this season anyway). There's no dropdown between the Europa League and the Conference League either; Olympiacos were in last season's Europa League group stage, before winning the Conference League.







HELLO, BEEB

Not since 1994 has there been Champions League football on the BBC. That changes this season. The Beeb have won the rights to show a Wednesday night highlights show for each of the next three seasons, bringing the competition back to terrestrial TV for the first time since ITV lost their rights in 2018.

Plucky little Amazon are also joining the party, broadcasting first-choice live matches on Tuesday nights all the way through to the semi-finals, with TNT screening every other fixture. The Europa League and Conference League will remain exclusively on TNT.

WHAT ELSE TO WATCH OUT FOR?

Bologna, Brest and Aston Villa aren't the only surprise qualifiers from major leagues: Girona make their Champions League debut after stunning Spain by finishing third in La Liga, having lost only one game before February.

Meanwhile, Stuttgart return for the first time in 15 seasons. Die Schwaben pipped Bayern Munich to second place in the Bundesliga in 2023-24, under 42-year-old boss Sebastien Hoeness (son of Dieter and nephew of Uli). But they've lost key players – among them, top scorer Serhou Guirassy and defender Waldemar Anton to Dortmund, as well as Hiroki Ito to Bayern.

Bayern, under new boss Vincent Kompany, dream of banishing the ghosts of their painful defeat to Chelsea in 2012, with the 2025 final taking place at the Allianz Arena again. A third England-born star joined their squad in July when Michael Olise followed in the footsteps of Harry Kane and Eric Dier.

Bayern and Dortmund are top seeds in the league phase, as are RB Leipzig with their history of zero German titles and one single progression past the Champions League's last 16. Yet Bayer Leverkusen are not, despite romping to the German double in 2023-24 without losing a game all season in any competition until the Europa League final in May. Xabi Alonso's charges hope to prove they're a genuine contender for *this* trophy.

After a year away, Liverpool are back under new boss Arne Slot, whose only previous campaign in the Champions League saw Feyenoord finish third in their group behind Atletico Madrid and Lazio last term.

Juventus also return, following the chaos of the 2022-23 campaign when they lost five of their six Champions League fixtures and were deducted 10 points in Serie A for false accounting, meaning they finished seventh rather than fourth. They were then banned from the Conference League for breaching UEFA Financial Fair Play regulations, months before Paul Pogba failed a drugs test and was suspended for four years. The Old Lady finished third last season, bringing some normality back to proceedings in Italy...

...then Max Allegri was sacked two days after being sent off in the Coppa Italia final, when he had responded by ranting at match officials, publicly waving off the club's sporting director, then reportedly threatening a journalist. Things are never dull in Turin.

THE SCORPION'S TALE

Nothing about Rene Higuita was ever conventional, from his bizarre tricks to his runs upfield and no fewer than 43 career goals. The Colombian was playing out from the back long before it became common for keepers – he tells *FFT* about his mad career, also featuring guns, gangs and jail...

Words Ed McCambridge **Interview** Ben Hayward

True insanity, it's often said, is "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." The quote has frequently been attributed to Albert Einstein, wrongly as it turns out. Yet one society's madman is another's genius, their brilliance mistrusted and ridiculed until it's finally accepted as being self-evident.

The young Rene Higuita wanted the same as every other kid in Medellin's crime-infested *barrios* in the 1970s. To play centre-forward for Colombia. To score at the World Cup. To become a national hero. "When I was a boy, I played as a striker," Higuita tells *FFT* now. "I scored goals, but destiny had other plans. It was only by chance, at a tournament when our goalkeeper didn't show up, that they put me in goal."

Needless to say, the experiment went well. His youth team suddenly had a talented and more reliable custodian, but there was just one problem. Higuita, living with his beloved grandmother Ana Felisa after his father left home and his mother passed away when he was young, still harboured dreams of playing outfield. Staying in his box wasn't an option for this sprightly renegade. "That desire to move the ball, to get forward and to score goals, it didn't leave me," he says, a glint forming in the corner of his eye. "I had to do it from between the goalposts. It's the most difficult position to do that from, but I did it."

Not even signing for Millonarios – one of Colombia's most prestigious clubs, a nine-hour drive away in capital Bogota – in 1985 could temper a 19-year-old Higuita's onfield wanderlust. "I got to the opposition area as often as possible," he recalls. "I was brought down in the box many times."

At Millonarios, the rebellious teenager deferred responsibility for the penalties he won to his more attacking team-mates. But that changed as he grew in confidence upon returning to Atletico Nacional – the Medellin club he'd supported as a boy – within a year. ▸

After replacing the departed Lorenzo Carrabs in the first team, Higuita began to realise his outfielder dreams, while keeping the gloves.

"I learned to leave behind that stage fright," he smiles. "I took the risk of taking free-kicks, taking penalties, contributing to the team's possession, going out and looking to win games. I'd send the ball down the left flank, then go and wait for it on the right."

Higuita continued his forays. Crowds in the top-flight Categoria Primera A were outraged.

"For many people, my style represented something a bit different," adds the 57-year-old, his trademark ringlets bouncing along to his voice's percussive beat. "I was seen as crazy, a clown. I received so many insults, but I did it to help the team. I only left my box when they were struggling to get hold of the ball. With my play, I tried to show them the way. To say, 'Look, if I – a goalkeeper – can play like this, then you can definitely do it further forward'.

"Usually, I just played as a libero. I won the ball back and distributed it. Sometimes I'd exchange passes with a team-mate before setting my side away on the attack. That's what fulfilled me. But if I saw the team was playing well, I knew they didn't need me."

By his second year, 1987, Higuita's ability to strike a dead ball saw him assigned free-kick and penalty duties at El Verde. He scored his first goal in a 6-1 rout of Independiente Medellin in December 1987 and went on to net another 29 times for the club, including 13 in the 1988 season alone. Those exploits, coupled with his constant determination to join attacks, led to a nickname that's stuck: '*El Loco*' – The Madman.

"It doesn't offend me, I like it," chuckles Higuita. "Because you have to find the real meaning of '*Loco*'. It's not just doing things differently, but going beyond your boundaries and not thinking the same as everyone else. So if people call me that, I accept it, and in a very good way."









"NO, HIGUITA, NO!"

Inspired by their goalkeeper's free-scoring exploits, Atletico Nacional were top-flight runners-up in 1988 and reached the final of the Copa Libertadores in 1989. After losing the first leg 2-0 to Paraguayan opponents Olimpia, Nacional took the second leg to penalties, where they unleashed their not-so-secret secret weapon. Higuita saved four Olimpia spot-kicks and converted one himself to inspire his side to continental supremacy.

Earlier that summer, Higuita had broken his duck at a major tournament for Colombia, opening the scoring from 12 yards in a 4-2 group-stage victory over Venezuela at the Copa America. It wasn't Higuita's first goal for his country – the curly-haired custodian had already notched against Finland and Peru.

Los Cafeteros failed to make it out of that competition's group stage, but the team achieved worldwide recognition a year later at Italia 90. Ahead of the tournament, coach Francisco Maturana – who managed Higuita for club and country – expressed confidence that his 23-year-old goalkeeper would leave a mark on world football. Though sweeper-keepers were nothing new – 1950s' Hungary selected Gyula Grosics as much for what he could do with his feet as his hands, and the Netherlands' 1974 side chose Jan Jongbloed for his ability to snuff out danger – Maturana felt Higuita's technique was something never seen before. "The Dutchman came out just to boot the ball into the stands," sniffed the Colombia boss. "Higuita can do much more. With Rene, we have 11 outfield players."

Maturana was proved right as Colombia progressed to the knockout stage for the first time, emerging from a group that included Yugoslavia, the UAE and eventual champions West Germany, who they held to a 1-1 draw. Higuita earned global fame for his unusual on-field antics, which included flicking the ball over Rudi Voller's head, pirouetting away from Yugoslavia striker Darko Pancev on the edge of his own penalty area and repeatedly storming out of his box to crash into tackles. Football had never witnessed a goalkeeper with such flair, such audacity.

"It was amazing, but more important was that we reached the World Cup knockouts for the first time," Higuita explains to *FFT*. "We had a lot of characters in the side, such as Carlos Valderrama, Tino Asprilla, Freddy Rincon and Luis Carlos Perea. We didn't have the experience that Colombian players have today – of having played in Europe. There was just '*El Pibe*' [Valderrama], who'd played in France for Montpellier, and Andres Escobar at Young Boys. The rest of us had barely left our own country."

Colombia's last-16 clash against Cameroon would highlight the risks involved in Higuita's cavalier playing style. Two minutes after the Indomitable Lions took a 1-0 lead in extra-time, Higuita miscontrolled a pass near the centre-circle and was dispossessed by Roger Milla. While the Colombian TV commentator screamed hysterically on the broadcast ("No, Higuita! No, Higuita! No, Higuita!"), Milla rolled the ball into an empty net. Colombia were out, with many pointing the finger at the nation's unorthodox shot-stopper. Higuita, however, has no regrets.

"No, none at all," he reflects. "When one is a pioneer, doing something different, there have to be mistakes and I paid for that. But



I believe that error led to something good in the world." A couple of years later, football's authorities changed the rules of the game to ban goalkeepers from picking up a backpass with their hands. In Colombia, it's known as the 'Higuita Law', a fact the man himself is hugely proud of.

"If I hadn't played that way, I don't think they would have changed the rule," he says. "Because of that rule, football is now more of a spectacle and the ball is in play more."

Despite the Cameroon defeat, Colombia's rousing performances captured hearts. "We put Colombia on the world's radar," declares Higuita, happily. "We paved the way for those representing the nation today."

The goalkeeper had become, in his own words, "the face of Colombia", with "everyone wanting to peg me as their pal." That even included Diego Maradona. The larger-than-life pair would visit each other's homes and party in Naples and Medellin.

"He was a friend, he was extraordinary," says Higuita, fondly. "It was better to have him as a friend than an enemy! He defended his friends with cloak and dagger."

Clockwise from top Rene remains a trailblazer for modern keepers; "If you lot can't score, then I'll do it"; Milla pounces at Italia 90; "Look out, here I come"

"I MADE MANY FRIENDS AT THAT TIME AND, YES, SEVERAL OF THEM WERE DRUG TRAFFICKERS – I CANNOT CHANGE THAT"

CARTELS, KIDNAP AND TWO ESCOBARS

Not all of Higuita's new celebrity friends were famous for their sporting prowess. Among them was Carlos Molina, a lieutenant in Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel who later defected to a rival gang. Molina was a part owner of Atletico Nacional. "I made many friends and, yes, several were drug traffickers – I cannot change that," Higuita later revealed. He also knew Escobar himself. Higuita insists that, at their first meeting, he tried to persuade the notorious cocaine kingpin to hand himself into the authorities for the good of Colombia. Eventually, Escobar did.

Shortly before a transfer to La Liga's Real Valladolid in the summer of '91, Higuita was invited to La Catedral, the luxurious personal prison built to house Escobar following his negotiated surrender. It had its own helipad, waterfall, bar, jacuzzi and football pitch, with Higuita one of many players summoned for a kickabout at the latter.

"It was organised with permits," the keeper reveals to *FFT* now.

"We didn't do anything illicit. We sought the permits, we got the permits and we went to La Catedral to see Pablo – nothing unusual. We footballers also travelled to other prisons, hospitals, even the Vatican.

"I wasn't afraid to go to La Catedral. Afraid of what? We were blessed and very fortunate in our lives to have football. Because of that, everyone loved us. I'm a friend of everyone." ▸



Higuita's associations with Molina and Escobar would soon come back to haunt him. In the spring of '93, Higuita received a phone call late at night, directly from Molina. "Rene, come to my house," he ordered. "I need you. I will send a car." When Higuita arrived at the drug baron's opulent ranch, things took a sinister turn. "My daughter's life is in your hands," explained Molina. "I need your help."

Molina claimed his former associate, and now adversary, had kidnapped his daughter for ransom. Escobar had fled La Catedral, but was facing ruin after a string of crackdowns by the Colombian government. Higuita's relationship with Escobar became pivotal in securing the safe return of Molina's daughter by acting as a go-between for warring drug lords. The goalkeeper felt he had little choice but to do as he was told.

"Higuita is like a child," Medellin journalist Hector Rincon later penned. "But he's not stupid. When a Medellin drug baron tells you, 'Do me a favour', it's impossible to say no – the consequences of refusal are clear."

When Higuita returned from Spain to rejoin Atletico Nacional in 1993, he was arrested by Colombian police for his role in the scandal. According to authorities, he received $64,000 for his function in the exchange, breaching Colombian law that prohibits financial gain from a kidnapping.

Higuita has since pleaded his innocence. "I acted for humanitarian reasons," he said.

CRAZY CUSTODIANS

There must be something in the water in South America, given the sheer number of *loco* goalkeepers they seem to produce...

JOSE CHILAVERT

Velez Sarsfield legend Chilavert scored more than 50 career goals, including eight for Paraguay, and even a hat-trick, but that's far from the end of his antics. 'The Bulldog' once chinned both Tino Asprilla and Diego Maradona, was given a suspended prison sentence for attacking a physio and also ran for his nation's presidency in 2023 – receiving less than one per cent of the vote. Boo.

ROBERTO ROJAS

During Italia 90 qualifying, Chile had to win in Brazil. With La Roja trailing 1-0, a bloodied Rojas claimed to have been hit by a firework and his team-mates refused to continue. Video evidence later revealed he'd cut himself using a razor blade in his glove, to try to force an abandonment. Brazil secured a 2-0 victory, Chile were banned from USA 94 and Rojas was suspended for life. Oops.

JOHNNY VEGAS

No, not *that* Johnny Vegas (real name Michael Joseph Pennington). Though we'd love to see the northern comic in goal for a string of Peruvian top-flight clubs, the other Vegas (Johnny Martin Vegas Fernandez) is among the top-scoring custodians in history, bagging 45 in all competitions. Measuring just (for a goalkeeper) 5ft 10in, he probably didn't net many Alisson-esque headers.

CARLOS ROA

After the 1998 World Cup, when Roa repelled penalties from Paul Ince and David Batty to eliminate England, the Mallorca gloveman was hot property. Manchester United were keen, but Roa was certain the world would end at the impending millennium and retired from football to join a religious mountain retreat. When the apocalypse didn't materialise, he swiftly un-retired. Ah.



"SOME PEOPLE WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD BY DOING THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER AGAIN. WE *LOCOS* DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT"



Clockwise from top Higuita is one of football's most familiar keepers; "Free-kick? Semi-final of the Copa Libertadores? I've got this"; Atletico Nacional fans all love their *Loco*

"If I were needed again to help free someone, I'd do it without hesitating. I'm a footballer, I know nothing about kidnapping laws." He spent seven miserable months in prison – a hunger strike eventually created the path for his release without charge.

Freed in early 1994 ahead of the World Cup, Higuita wasn't fit enough to be selected in Maturana's squad. Without their star keeper, a Colombia team tipped as a dark horse for the trophy – by Pele, no less – instead finished rock bottom of a group containing Romania, Switzerland and hosts USA. It's an episode that still rankles.

"I was upset to miss the 1994 World Cup," he admits now. "Between 1990 and 1994, I had a lot going on in my personal life and problems with the law, so that practically ruled me out of the tournament. My God, it was unfair, because if I'd been guilty I'd have been convicted."

Higuita stops short of claiming Colombia could have performed better with him in the team instead of America de Cali gloveman Oscar Cordoba. "Would they have won with me in the line-up? Oh, that's in the past. The past is very uncertain. Speaking about what has gone is difficult."

What is indisputable, though, is the savage effect that tournament had on Colombia's international reputation. During their second group game, against the USA in Los Angeles, Higuita's Atletico Nacional team-mate Andres Escobar (no relation to Pablo) inadvertently scored an own goal while stretching to block a cross. The error gifted the hosts a lead they never relinquished. Back in Medellin after the finals, the defender visited a nightclub with some friends – in the car park at 3am, three men jumped out of a pick-up truck and shot the defender six times, allegedly crying "Gol!" after each blast.

To this day, many believe Escobar's murder was ordered by criminal gangs who had lost a sackful of money betting on the match. The outpouring of joy that followed Colombia's rip-roaring Italia 90 was now ancient history. Higuita still thinks about his friend and team-mate often. "For me, football is a passion," he reflected. "Every footballer is passionate and dedicated to the game. It was sad that he passed away in an unfortunate manner – I still miss him."

RISE OF THE SCORPION

If 1994 represented the darkest episode in Colombia and Higuita's footballing story, the next year was arguably the keeper's *annus mirabilis* – a barnstorming return to form that included the caper most associated with this shot-stopping maverick.

Prior to that came a third-placed finish at the 1995 Copa America, followed by a run to the Copa Libertadores final. In the semi-final first leg of the latter, against Argentine giant River Plate, Higuita netted a stunning free-kick, then scored a penalty and saved another in the second-leg shootout. Nacional fans still celebrate Higuita's heroic displays throughout that season, regardless of the eventual final defeat to Brazilians Gremio.

A week after losing to Gremio arrived the moment that has come to define a career – the 'scorpion kick' to clear Jamie Redknapp's looping cross in September's friendly draw with England at Wembley. The midfielder's effort was floating directly towards Higuita in the Colombia goal when the stopper flipped forward, lifted his legs behind his head and kicked the ball away from danger using the soles of both feet. "Good heavens," barked commentator Ian Darke. "Have you ever seen a goalkeeper do anything like that?"

England manager Terry Venables called the move "extraordinary" – in the studio, Gordon Banks said he'd have been "punched in the nose" by 1966 World Cup-winning centre-half Jack Charlton had he ever attempted to do something so reckless.

Even pre-social media, the stunt went viral. "It's the sort of thing only one person can do," Higuita told reporters after the match. "I have a massive repertoire, but I don't plan ahead." He later revealed that he thought the referee was about to blow his whistle for offside – the linesman had already raised his flag – only for play to be waved on. It was, nevertheless, a blockbuster exhibition of gymnastics from a 29-year-old.

Higuita would play, off and on, until the age of 43, albeit never scaling such heights across brief stints in Mexico, Ecuador and Venezuela. The goals kept coming, however, including a long-range larrup from his own penalty box for Colombians Bajo Cauca in 2003.

Two years earlier, the veteran had returned to the international spotlight for Maradona's sold-out testimonial at La Bombonera. With thousands fearing the dangerously bloated Argentine icon could collapse at any moment, Higuita played his part by allowing his old friend to score twice from the spot – efforts one journalist claimed "a toddler would have been able to save."

"Sure, he had his mistakes and his errors," Higuita tells *FFT*. "But I loved Diego as he was. He was '*un loco*', just like me."

The madness continued until the very end of Higuita's career. In 2004, he tested positive for cocaine while playing for Ecuadorian club Aucas. Twelve months later, he appeared on the Colombian version of reality TV show *Survivor*, in which celebrities had to live on a desert island. Also in 2005, he underwent plastic surgery on another reality show. The operation drastically changed his appearance – the results of which Higuita was not overly impressed with.

But it's on the pitch where *El Loco*'s legacy endures. His sweeper-keeper shenanigans, marauding runs upfield and stunning ability with his feet influenced a new generation of ball-playing custodians, an unconditional presence in modern teams coached by Pep Guardiola and others.

Higuita believes his style helped glovemen to "have more mobility and add to the play, making the game more spectacular by playing with the feet and not just the hands."

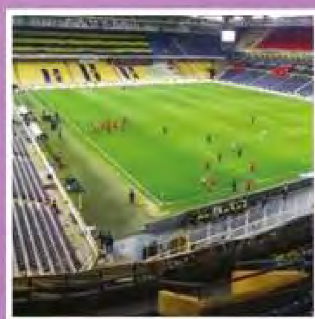
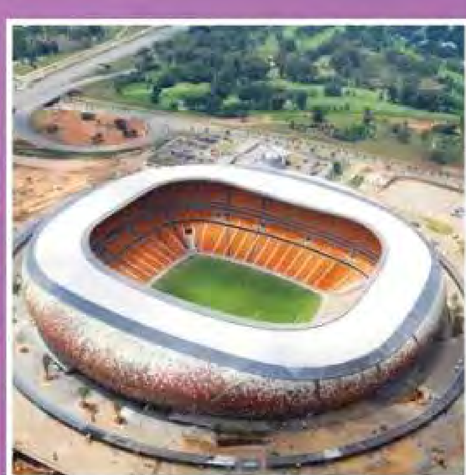
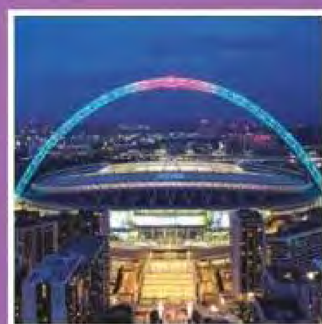
He pauses. "I'm very happy with what I left to football," he muses to *FFT*, even if he feels a tinge of sadness at the lack of goalscoring No.1s around today. "That responsibility has been taken away from the keeper, because there's more risk – business has transformed football's dynamic."

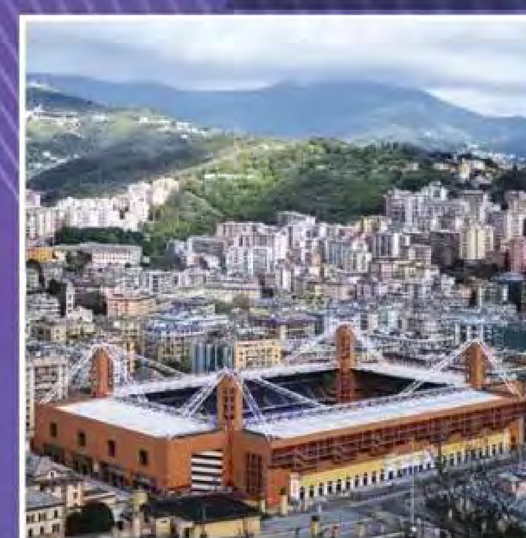
For Higuita, the goals, the scorpion kicks, the smiles his tomfoolery gave to supporters and the legacy he left behind are merely part of a bigger picture: the choice to do things a bit differently. To live a life less ordinary.

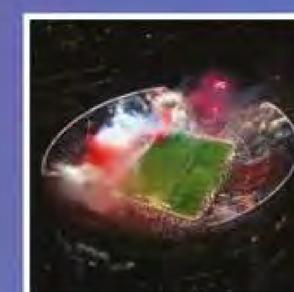
"Some people want to change the world by continuing to do the same thing," he smiles. "We *Locos* don't do the same thing. We do something different."

30 BEST STADIUMS IN THE WORLD




FFT ranks the greatest arenas around the globe, based on factors including aesthetics, atmosphere and history

Words Greg Lea



30 STADIO LUIGI FERRARIS

Named after an ex-Genoa player who was killed during the First World War, the 33,000-capacity Stadio Luigi Ferraris is Italy's oldest venue still used for football. Constructed back in 1911, it's been Genoa's home ever since, also opening its doors to Sampdoria in 1946. Often described as an 'English-style ground', the towers in all four corners make it unique. **NOTABLE MATCH** Ireland's penalty shootout win over Romania in the last 16 of Italia 90.

29 ESTADIO MUNICIPAL

How many football grounds are carved into a mountain? It's a distinction claimed by the Estadio Municipal de Braga, the work of an architect named Eduardo Souto de Moura who won a prestigious award for his daring design. A special setting to watch games, it hosted a couple of matches at Euro 2004. **DID YOU KNOW?** Despite having no stand at either end, the 30,000-seat stadium cost €108.1m because of the rock-moving process.

28 OLYMPIASTADION

Dating back to 1936, the Olympiastadion has a rich but not always pretty history – swastikas and Nazi salutes abounded when it was used for the Summer Olympics that year. Now the 74,000-capacity home of second-tier Hertha Berlin, it staged the 2006 World Cup Final after undergoing a major renovation and hosted the Euro 2024 Final. **BEST FEATURE** The Olympic cauldron, still standing at the open end of the ground.

27 SINGAPORE STADIUM

Considering the sweltering conditions, it was no massive shock when a proposal including a retractable roof and air conditioning for the Singapore National Stadium received the thumbs up. A truly modern sporting arena, it boasts configurable seating, a roof made of lightweight material and easy access to public transport – the best £875m can buy. **NOTABLE MATCH** Neymar scored four goals as Brazil thrashed Japan in a 2014 friendly.

26 SUKRU SARACOGLU

If you're looking for a red-hot atmosphere, book yourself a plane ticket to football-mad Istanbul. Fenerbahce's fortress edges out those of Galatasaray and Besiktas because of its history. Named after a former Turkish prime minister, the Sukru Saracoglu opened in 1908 but has since had a refurbishment. **NOTABLE MATCH** The 47,000-capacity site hosted the last ever UEFA Cup final, in 2009, as Shakhtar Donetsk beat Werder Bremen.

25 LUSAIL STADIUM

The Lusail's luxurious golden exterior takes inspiration from the decorative motifs seen on traditional lights, bowls and art across the Middle East. It's also a symbol of the Qatari culture to do absolutely nothing by halves. A Faberge egg of a venue, it sits in solitude, adjacent to the equally futuristic Lusail City. **NOTABLE MATCH** Argentina's World Cup final win over France – the 89,000-seat oval will always be where Lionel Messi made history.







24 SOCCER CITY

Opened in 1989, Soccer City was revamped and expanded to a capacity of 94,736 for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, where it was the setting for the final as well as the famous Uruguay-Ghana showdown in the last eight. Johannesburg-based Kaizer Chiefs play their home matches there, as do the national side. **DID YOU KNOW?** The eye-catching stadium has also been nicknamed 'The Calabash', due to its resemblance to a classic African pot.

23 JOHAN CRUYFF ARENA

Originally called the Amsterdam ArenA, Ajax renamed their home after their greatest-ever player in 2018. It has staged nine European Championship fixtures, on top of the 1998 Champions League Final. With a capacity just shy of 56,000, the Johan Cruyff Arena is the largest football ground in the Netherlands. **NOTABLE MATCH** Spurs' comeback win over Ajax in the 2019 Champions League semi-final, thanks to hat-trick hero Lucas Moura.

22 AZADI STADIUM

It might have an official capacity of 78,116, but a hefty 128,000 people once crammed into the Azadi Stadium to watch a World Cup qualifier between Iran and Australia. Club sides Esteghlal and Persepolis also call the Azadi home and a deafening atmosphere is guaranteed for the duo's derby matches. **DID YOU KNOW?** The ground was renamed after the 1979 Iranian Revolution to Azadi, which translates as 'freedom' in Persian.

21 ESTADIO DA LUZ

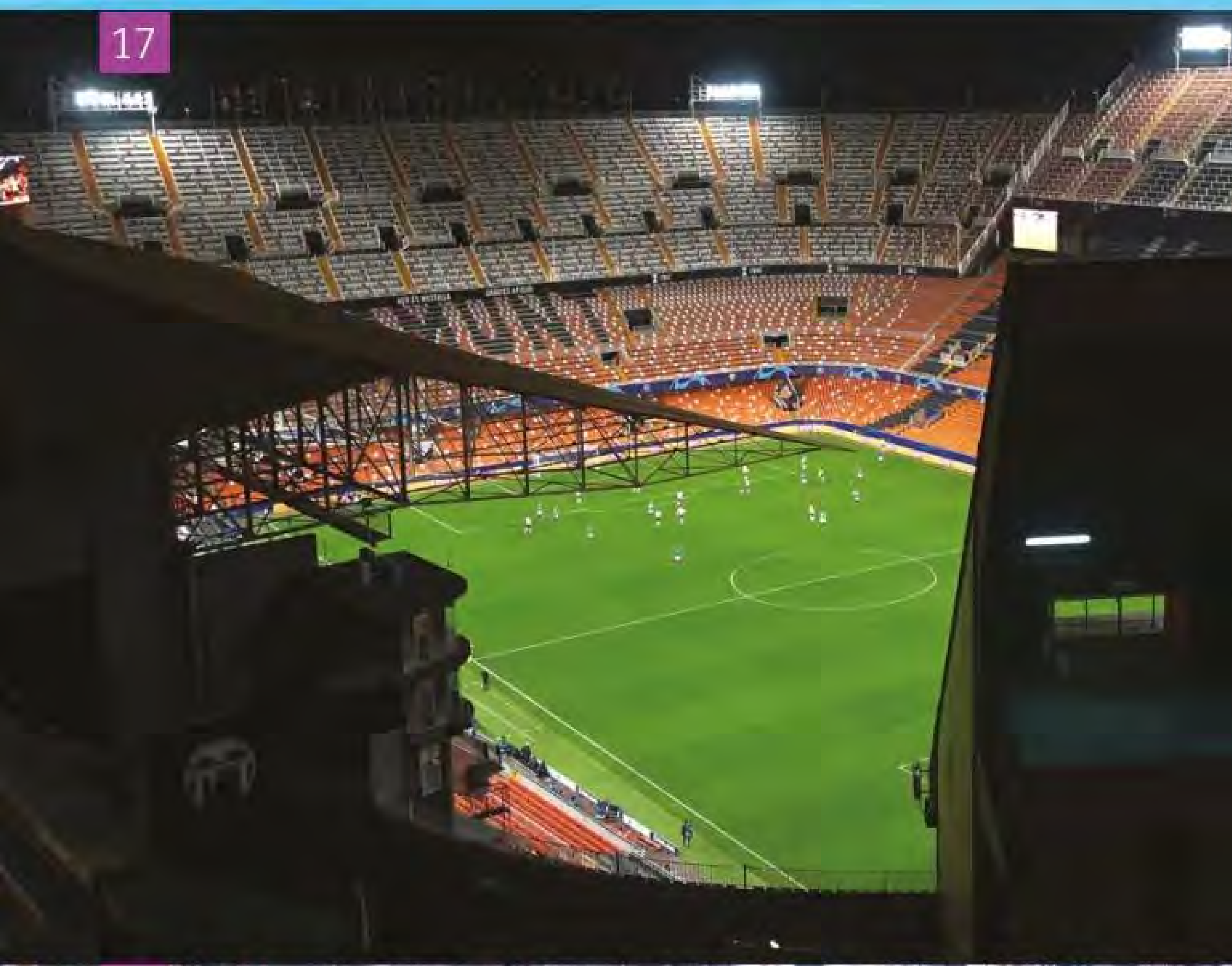
Built to be both a new home for Benfica and the centrepiece of Euro 2004, the Estadio da Luz is a stunning stadium on the outskirts of Lisbon. Two Champions League finals have been contested there since it opened, while the Portugal national team makes regular appearances at the 64,642-capacity arena. **NOTABLE MATCHES** England's rollercoaster quarter-final loss to hosts Portugal in 2004 and Greece's shock victory in the showpiece.

20 STADE DE FRANCE

The 81,000-seat venue where France lifted their first World Cup in 1998, thanks in large part to Zinedine Zidane, has also hosted the Euro 2016 Final and the Champions League final on three occasions, while Les Bleus play home games at this bowl in Paris' suburbs. **DID YOU KNOW?** The ground was besieged by humongous moths in the Euro 2016 Final because the stadium floodlights had been left on overnight ahead of the big occasion.

19 DE KUIP

Erected in 1938, De Kuip screams character both outside and in. The architects largely based their design on Highbury, Arsenal's old home, with added inspiration from New York's Yankee Stadium. The 47,500-capacity ground also hosted the final of Euro 2000. **NOTABLE MATCHES** No fewer than four English clubs have lifted European trophies at De Kuip: Spurs in 1963, Aston Villa (1982), Everton ('85) and Manchester United ('91).





15

18 CAIRO STADIUM

Don't expect to hear yourself think during a decisive game at the Cairo International Stadium, one of the best grounds outside Europe and South America. The open-air arena holds 75,000 spectators and is full when Egypt are in town, or when arch rivals and co-tenants Zamalek and Al Ahly clash. **DID YOU KNOW?** The stadium's architect was German Werner March, the same man who designed the Olympiastadion in Berlin.

17 MESTALLA

It's been 17 years since Valencia first began building a new stadium, but football purists everywhere are delighted that they remain at the old Mestalla. With its orange seats and notoriously steep stands, the 49,000-seat gem is like no other. Mestalla hosted three of Spain's matches at the 1982 World Cup. **NOTABLE MATCH** Northern Ireland's shock 1-0 success over World Cup hosts Spain 42 years ago, thanks to Gerry Armstrong's goal.

16 ESTADIO METROPOLITANO

When Atletico Madrid departed the beloved Vicente Calderon in 2017, there were fears that the new Estadio Metropolitano would pale in comparison, but the 70,000-capacity coliseum can produce a tremendous racket. The 2019 Champions League Final between Liverpool and Tottenham was played there. **DID YOU KNOW?** Before being renovated, the site was a rudimentary athletics venue built to bid for the World Championships.

15 ANFIELD

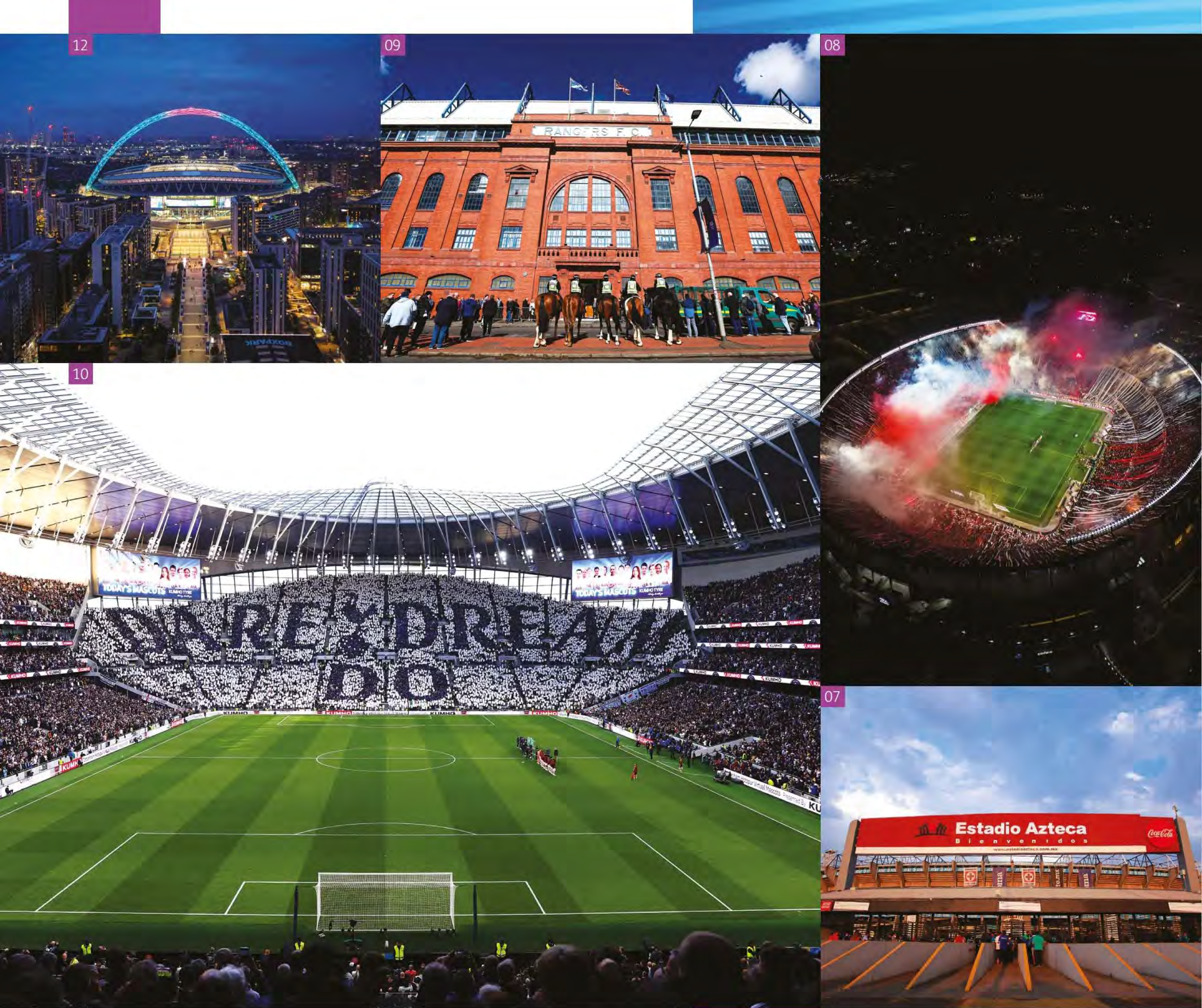
Nestled in between rows of terraced houses, Anfield sits right at the heart of the Liverpool community. Originally the home of Everton, the Reds have been based there since 1892 and abandoned plans for a new stadium in the 2000s. The club instead opted to stay at their spiritual home, upping it to 61,000 seats. **DID YOU KNOW?** Anfield staged matches at Euro 96, and also a pre-tournament play-off when the Netherlands defeated Ireland 2-0.

14 STADE VELODROME

Many modern arenas are slammed for a lack of character and identikit design – however, neither of these can be levelled at the Stade Velodrome. Marseille have played there since 1937, but the ground's extraordinary elliptical roof is the result of some sizeable remodelling before Euro 2016. The capacity is now 67,000. **DID YOU KNOW?** The Velodrome, as you may expect, was first used for cycling, but seating replaced the track that circled the stadium.

13 CELTIC PARK

Celtic aren't the force they once were on the European stage, but no Champions League or Europa League visitor relishes a trip to their 60,000-capacity home ground. Dating back to 1892 but modernised several times since, Celtic Park – or Paradise, as the club's fans call it – is the ideal blend of old and new. **NOTABLE MATCH** Scotland beat the Faroe Islands 6-0 there in 2006 when Hampden Park was busy hosting a Robbie Williams gig.



12 WEMBLEY

Wembley still cops its fair share of criticism, but the 90,000-capacity national stadium in north London has plenty going for it. The name alone is recognisable in every corner of the globe, while the imposing arch gives it a distinctive look, just as the Twin Towers did at the old ground located on the same dirt. **DID YOU KNOW?** The new stadium's record crowd was for the 2008 FA Cup Final: 89,874 fans watched Portsmouth beat Cardiff 1-0.

11 ALLIANZ ARENA

It may look like an enormous spaceship from the outside, but Bayern Munich's home is an exhilarating place to watch football. The bold, innovative design also produces an electric environment, especially on European nights. The 75,000-capacity bowl previously hosted 1860 Munich, but they left a few years ago. **NOTABLE MATCH** Chelsea's 2012 Champions League Final triumph over Bayern Munich on penalties, in the Germans' own backyard.

10 TOTTENHAM STADIUM

The Tottenham Hotspur Stadium sits on the site of the old White Hart Lane, at the hub of the local community. The acoustics and fan experience at the 63,000-capacity arena are epic, while the towering South Stand, which can seat 17,500, is a sight to behold. It may have cost £1bn, but it was worth every penny. **DID YOU KNOW?** Despite plenty of chatter about a cheese room before the stadium's swanky opening, no such room appeared.

09 IBROX

Architect Archibald Leitch designed many football stadiums in Britain, but Ibrox was probably the Glaswegian's most exquisite work. With its red-brick facade, the main stand (a listed building) is strikingly grand, while the atmosphere is fierce. Rangers have played at the 51,000-seat venue since 1899. **DID YOU KNOW?** Ibrox lost a bid to host the 1996 Cup Winners' Cup Final because UEFA feared a shortage of hotel rooms in the city.

08 ESTADIO MONUMENTAL

River Plate have called the 84,000-capacity Estadio Monumental their home since 1938. Once a horseshoe, all four stands are now connected, which benefits the decibel levels. As well as countless Superclasicos, Argentina play many of their internationals there, too. **NOTABLE MATCH** The 1978 World Cup Final, when hosts Argentina, welcomed by a huge tickertape parade, beat the Netherlands 3-1 after extra time with a Mario Kempes brace.

07 AZTECA

The Azteca was the first ground to host two World Cup finals, in 1970 and 1986. Those who watched either tournament couldn't help but be dazzled by the colour and noise of the splendid arena. Home to Cruz Azul, Club America and the Mexico national team, the Azteca currently has a capacity of 87,523. **NOTABLE MATCHES** Brazil's 1970 triumph over Italy and Argentina's 1986 quarter-final win over England, featuring the 'Hand of God'.

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06 CAMP NOU

The largest stadium in Europe, no ground-hopping aficionado's work is complete until they've popped to the Camp Nou. Barcelona have played there since 1957, though they've temporarily switched to the Olympic Stadium while renovation work goes on to increase capacity to 105,000. Inspired by Feyenoord's De Kuip, the Camp Nou has no open corners. **NOTABLE MATCH** Manchester United's 1999 Champions League Final with Bayern Munich.

05 SAN SIRO

Exit the nearby metro station and San Siro soon sets the pulse racing. The imposing concrete towers and spiral staircases are unique, but nothing prepares you for the noise inside. Both Milan and Inter have tried to move away, but San Siro is still standing. **DID YOU KNOW?** Located in the San Siro district, the 80,000-seat stadium is officially named the Estadio Giuseppe Meazza, after the two-time World Cup winning forward.

04 SANTIAGO BERNABEU

The world's biggest football club demands a stadium befitting that status – and Real Madrid's Estadio Santiago Bernabeu packs 85,000 Madridistas into its gigantic stands. The stadium's makeover, which included a stunning steel roof, was finished last year. **DID YOU KNOW?** The Bernabeu is the only ground selected to host the showpieces of the World Cup, European Championship, Champions League and Copa Libertadores.

03 WESTFALENSTADION

Borussia Dortmund's 81,000-capacity Signal Iduna Park houses one of the most incredible sights (and sounds) in world football. 'The Yellow Wall' is the nickname for those fans who stand on the South Bank, which holds 24,454 supporters alone and creates one of the finest spectacles anywhere in sport. **NOTABLE MATCHES** Liverpool's 5-4 win over Alaves in the 2001 UEFA Cup Final and Italy's 2006 World Cup semi slaying of Germany.

02 MARACANA

There is no more evocative stadium in the world than the Maracana, even if the Estadio Jornalista Mario Filho in Rio de Janeiro isn't actually called that. Pele, Garrincha, Zico, Ronaldo and Ronaldinho have all strutted their stuff at a ground that can fit 73,000 souls and has hosted two World Cup finals. **NOTABLE MATCH** The 'Maracanazo' – Brazil's 1950 World Cup Final loss to Uruguay, in front of 173,850 fans. The defeat scarred a nation.

01 LA BOMBONERA

Its official name is the Estadio Alberto Jose Armando, but everyone knows Boca Juniors' home as La Bombonera – the 'chocolate box' – because of its distinctive D-shape. There's something alluring about the steep blue and yellow terraces, while the atmosphere is undoubtedly among the best on the planet. **DID YOU KNOW?** The iconic 57,000-capacity venue has never staged a World Cup match, after it was overlooked for the 1978 finals.

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